Terms of Allegiance

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Ever get the feeling you're being kept in the dark? Raphael wakes up with a mysterious gap in memory, but what is it that his brothers aren't telling him? The answer proves more complicated than expected. Followed by the sequel, The Clans.

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Terms of Allegiance

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Part One: Suspicions

Terms of Allegiance

Part One: Suspicions

He was being pulled slowly but insistently from oblivion to awareness.

Distinctly, he heard Michelangelo say, "I think he's waking up."

With great effort, he opened his eyes. The haze of faces shifted and slowly came into focus. He was lying on his bed and his whole family was crowded into the narrow confines of his room. They were looking at him anxiously. Finally Mike asked, "How do you feel Raph?"

He thought about it. He felt heavy and sluggish. "Okay, I guess," he said slowly. His tongue felt like cotton moving in his mouth. He struggled to recall what had happened, why he was here. He started to sit up and was pushed back down gently. "Easy, Raphael," Splinter ordered. "Do not overexert yourself."

He rubbed his eyes. They ached. "What happened?"

"You were knocked out in the fight," Donatello explained. "Do you remember?"

He did now. It had been an ambush. They had been tailing two members of the self-proclaimed Big Toe, a small clan of ex-Foot ninjas. The weakened New York Foot Clan was fracturing; pockets of deserters banded together, causing as much crime as the old Clan and fighting each other for territory. The one thing they shared was their sentiment towards the killers of Oruku Saki. The ninja that had attacked Raphael and his brothers had outnumbered them but were relatively inexperienced fighters; scrappy, but sloppy. Raphael

remembered facing off against a couple of them. That was where clarity ended.

"How long have I been out?" he asked, the sting of embarrassment in his voice.

"Over a day," Don answered, looking at him steadily.

"What time is it?"

"Two-thirty in the morning."

"Geez." They must have hit him hard. He looked at each of his brothers in turn, but they seemed uninjured, except for Donatello, who had a gauze bandage near his hip. They looked tired, though. All of them, even Splinter, wore expressions of mingled exhaustion and relief. And a hint of something else. Something like fear.

"Is everything okay?" he asked uncertainly.

"Sure Raph," Mike smiled at him. "I've got some soup waiting for you."

"Why do I feel so weird?" His words slurred.

"You've probably got a concussion," Don said. "Be sure to take it easy for the next few days."

"We should let him rest," Leo suggested from the back of the room, speaking for the first time. Splinter nodded in grave agreement. They left him with instructions to lie still as much as possible. Still groggy, he had no trouble falling asleep.

The next day, he was up and moving about, though he felt a little weaker than usual. Over a hefty breakfast, he asked, "So what did I miss?"

Don filled him in. "Not much. We trounced most of them, and the rest took off. We didn't follow because we had to get you home."

Raphael glowered and shook his head in rare consternation. "I can't believe it. I must've been sleep-fighting to get caught off guard like that." He felt the back of his head, relieved not to find any swelling or pain. No damage anywhere else either, except for some sore muscles in his abdomen. "Did anyone see how it happened?"

Mike shook his head. "It happened really fast." He shrugged, then clapped his brother on the shell. "C'mon, you know how it is. Just takes a split second of not being totally on top of things. Could've happened to any of us."

He joined his brothers in afternoon practice. Splinter's furry eyebrows rose a notch when he came into the training room. "Do not feel obligated to train today if you do not feel up for it, Raphael," the Master said.

"I'm up for it." He gave his sais a warm-up twirl. "I feel fine."

"Are you sure?" Leo asked.

"I said yeah already," Raph snapped.

He was surprised at how quickly he got winded. After a few minutes, he felt fatigue setting in and cursed under his breath. Maybe he'd been hurt a bit worse than he'd figured, but still...

To his relief, Splinter moved them into some simple drills and breathing exercises. Reluctantly, he followed the Master's order to sit out the next set of sparring matches. Just as he was regaining his energy, Splinter called an early end to the session.

They bowed their way out of the training room and Raph, his mood soured, dropped himself onto the couch in front of the TV. The remote didn't work. He took the back cover off and jiggled the

batteries, but no luck. Grumbling, he went up to turn on the TV manually, but the screen remained blank.

"Don!" he hollered. "The TV's broken!"

"Yeah, I know," Donatello answered, not looking up from his book. "We discovered that yesterday."

"Can you fix it?"

"I tried already. I don't think I can without getting new parts. The bulb's blown."

"You mean we've got to get a new set?"

Don shrugged. "Probably. I'll play with it a bit more later."

"Stupid piece of garbage." Raph scowled.

Donatello glanced at his brother. "You'll live without TV, Raph," he said stiffly.

April came by later in the day. She hugged Raphael tightly when she saw him. "I heard about what happened," she said, sounding a little choked. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Hey, no worries," he said, patting her back awkwardly. "It wasn't a big deal."

"Yeah, but still," she said, letting go of him reluctantly, "it's good to see you." Raph was startled to see her eyes glistening. She turned away quickly and busied herself with unpacking a sack of groceries she'd brought for them.

Perhaps there was something bothering her. He looked for a chance to ask, but then decided he must have been mistaken. April stayed for dinner and seemed fine for the rest of the evening. They dined on Mike's lasagna and played Risk afterwards. She joked and laughed

with them like she always did, though once he caught her looking at him thoughtfully.

The next couple of days passed uneventfully. "Shouldn't we be topside checking out what's going on with those Big Toe punks?" Raph asked one evening. He was surprised no one else had mentioned it.

"Well, we haven't heard any suspicious news. Maybe they're laying low right now," Leo suggested.

"Of course we haven't heard any news. Our friggin' TV is busted."

Leo looked surprised. "April would have passed on anything she heard," he said.

"Well, we can't depend on April for everything," he countered. His voice took on a challenging tone that he knew Leo hated. "We could be doing something other than just sitting on our asses."

"Like what?" Leo asked calmly.

"We should at least go *out* and see , " Raph insisted. Other than their regular jogs through the tunnels, he hadn't left the lair for days. To be honest, he hadn't really felt up to it before today, but now he was itching to hit the streets.

"Maybe later," Leo replied, turning back to polishing his katana.

Raphael grabbed his trench coat and shrugged it on.

Leo looked up. "What are you doing?"

"Going out."

Leonardo moved abruptly into Raph's path. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said in a flat voice that made it clear that he was not just voicing opinion.

"I didn't ask you to come." Raph made a motion to shove past him.

Leonardo shifted to block his way again. A strange look has come over his face. "Raph," he said earnestly, "you really shouldn't. I mean, you're still not up to par after-"

"Bullshit."

"-and there may still be Foot soldiers, or ex-Foot-"

"You just said they were laying low," Raph refuted.

"I said they *might* be laying low." The familiar tone of angry authority had crept into Leo's voice.

Raph's reflexive response would have been to push his meddling sibling aside and storm through the door. He tensed, ready to do just that, but was struck by the oddness of the situation. True, he and Leonardo butted heads on all manner to things, but this was ridiculous. He stepped back, fists balling. "So what is this, Leo? I'm under house arrest, is that it?"

Leonardo stared at him. "Of course not," he said, strangely monotone. "It's just I – I don't want you getting into any scraps tonight."

The oddness gnawed at him. Something Leo wasn't telling him. "Okay," he said slowly, forcing his fists to unclench inside his pockets. "No fights. I'm just gonna go up, get some air. I'll watch a movie." A long pause. "That okay?" he asked, failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Hey, who's going for a movie? I'm up for that!" Michelangelo piped up, suddenly and conveniently close by. Raph had the feeling that Mike had heard the whole exchange. His eyes darted to the side of the room. Donatello was standing in the doorway, just inside the kitchen. Raph had the fleeting and ridiculous suspicion that all three

of them had been ready to move in unison to prevent him from leaving, by force if necessary.

Leo forced a small, placating smile. "Okay." He stepped out of the way casually. "Have a good time."

Raph brushed past him and once in the tunnels he broke into a light run. He took the first opportunity to ascend to the street and for a moment he felt tempted to drop the manhole cover into place and lose Mike. But he didn't. He let his brother catch up to him and they walked down the small, quiet streets that led to the local movie theatre – the old one that played second-run films and was always in danger of going under, but whose back entrance they could jimmy open once the lights went down.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Then Mike said, "Don't let Leo get to you."

Raphael's mouth twisted as if tasting something bitter. "What was he so worked up about anyway?" he grumbled as much to himself as to Mike.

Mike was silent for a moment. "He just worries, you know that already."

"Yeah," Raph said. He was still puzzled. For a second, back in the lair, he'd gotten the distinct impression that there was something else his brothers had left unsaid.

Raphael forgot all about the incident in the following week. Leo hadn't said a word about it and they'd been busy with other activities. April invited them all over for dinner and Raph could never stay in a bad mood while at April's.

The day after, Casey had phoned. "Yo Raph, my main man!" he crowed.

"Hey," Raph said, smiling despite himself. "What'cha doin'?"

"Not much," Casey admitted.

"Wanna hit the pavement? See what's going on?"

A pause. "Well, I dunno."

"Aw, come'on."

"Man, I'm not really up for it tonight. Tell you what. Why dont'cha come on over, and we'll just chill out. I've got some beer, a couple good flicks..."

"Well... yeah, okay," he said, disappointed. He was craving some action. But the beers and Lethal Weapon movies had been alright.

Leonardo had made a surprising proposition. He suggested they visit the zoo. They hadn't been there since they were kids. Raph implied that it was dorky, but nevertheless, they went. Snuck in at night, which was really the best time to go anyway, since all the cool animals were awake. A little family outing of sorts.

There were only two things that bothered Raph.

One was Splinter. The old rat still rose early every morning, but he seemed to be pensive and moved with an air of fatigue. Raph wondered if he was the only one who noticed. Surely Leo must, though he said nothing.

One day Raphael found Splinter sitting alone in the training room, not meditating, just sitting quietly.

"Sit next to me, Raphael," Splinter said.

Raph hesitated, then sat. He wondered if he was in for some sort of lecture.

Splinter turned his luminous brown eyes on him. "Are you happy, my son?"

Raph blinked. "What do you mean?"

Splinter sighed and seemed to mull over his next words. "I have given you a hard life, Raphael. Do not think that I have never doubted myself." Splinter's long whiskers flattened back and his voice dropped. "Your brothers accept or at least make the best of it, but you've never hidden the fact that want so much more. I wish I could give you all that you deserve, Raphael, even though I know I cannot."

"Master-" Raph broke in hoarsely. Splinter silenced him with a gesture.

"Let me finish. You must believe that I always wanted what I thought was best for you. Perhaps I was mistaken in what I thought was best. If that is the case, I hope you and your brothers can forgive me."

"Why are you talking like this, Splinter?" Raph drew back, a disturbed frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Sure, life sucks sometimes. Sometimes it sucks a lot. But if it weren't for you, we wouldn't *have* a life, period." He was baffled by his Master's self-doubting melancholy. "Maybe I don't have everything I want," he admitted sullenly, "but I have what I *need* , and...well... I guess that makes me happy enough."

Splinter's gaze was thoughtful and tender. He smiled and patted Raphael's hand with his furry one.

The Master was getting old, Raph thought, not for the first time. It bothered him.

There was a second thing that bothered him. His training had been going pretty badly, all said. He wasn't slacking off - he trained as regularly as ever, but something felt *off* . It wasn't anything he could

really put his finger on, it was just that the strength and speed that he' d always taken for granted were elusive. He didn't think there was anything really wrong until it hit him in the gut. Literally.

He'd been sparring with Leonardo. Leo looked as though he hadn't even broken a sweat. Scowling, Raph drove at him with a series of blinding sai techniques. His brother shifted out of reach and blocked the assault with unfalteringly precise countermoves. Raph fell back and reassessed. He couldn't shake the feeling that Leo was going easy on him. Which, of course, was ridiculous. He would be the last living being that Leonardo would go easy on.

"Tired?" Leo asked.

"You wish." Raph skillfully feinted his next move and crowed in triumph as Leo mistakenly compromised his position to block it. One sai neatly robbed Leonardo of his katana, the other was a blur as it drove in for the "killing" blow.

Leo's surprise didn't last longer than a half-second. He knocked aside the incoming blow with reflexive accuracy, pivoted, and planted a solid kick in Raphael's stomach.

A lance of pain, thoroughly unexpected and exquisitely fierce, shot through Raphael's lower torso. He dropped to his knees, too stunned to cry out.

Leonardo did it for him – a sharp yell of alarm as he caught Raphael rolling forward in agony. Raph made a muffled noise through gritted teeth, but the inexplicable hurt was fading quickly.

What the hell *was* that? He took a shaky breath and made a move to stand up. Everyone had rushed into the training room and was staring at him. He felt like an idiotic side show. He shook off Mike's attempt to help him up and walked unaided to the sofa, where he sat down heavily.

"Whatever that was, it's gone," he told them.

Splinter looked painfully concerned as he exchanged glances with Leonardo. "Take the rest of the day off, Raphael," he said.

"I'm *fine,* " Raph insisted. "It must be some old wound that's acting up."

They accepted his statement silently, though they obviously didn't believe him.

He had to strain to hear what was being said, but he could still make it out. Donatello was in Leonardo's room, and the two of them were talking in deliberately low voices.

"What *happened* there, Leo?"

"I don't know. For a second, I just- I just forgot." Leo's voice sounded uncharacteristically vulnerable. "Don-"

"No, Leo. It's not over yet," Don said firmly.

He heard Donatello sneak down the hall to his own room. It was dark and silent. They all thought he was asleep by now, but he'd been lying awake for hours, his mind weighed down with bewilderment and turmoil. The conversation he'd just heard only added fuel to the slowly burning flame of uncertainty.

They were hiding something from him, there was no doubt of that. It should have been obvious, now that he thought about it. Small differences, signals that something was amiss. Leo and his strange insistence that Raph not leave home that night over a week ago. And lately, he hadn't been left alone much. In fact, they had made sure that someone was with him almost all the time. He hadn't noticed the perfectly innocent excuses: Mike wanting to go to a movie, April coming over for dinner, Leo wanting to go to the zoo, of all things. Leo should have been the biggest clue. He had been remarkably

undemanding recently. No lectures or disapproving frowns that might drive Raph to take some time off.

They were babysitting him so that he had no opportunity to discover what they were keeping from him. What could it be? Something to cause his own brothers to lie to him. It was so unlikely that he might have dismissed the whole line of thought as unfounded paranoia, if it wasn't for what had happened today. He could not remember any old wounds that would flare up in his abdomen like a white-hot poker. Afterwards, he'd gone into the bathroom and taken a close look at the spot where Leo had kicked him. There didn't seem to be anything physically wrong, but he recalled that the muscles that joined with the bottom two panels of his plastron had been a little cramped last week. He felt along the groove where shell met tissue and found thin, pale, well-stitched scars. He had no idea where they might have come from, but they were so precise he didn't think they could be battle wounds. Someone had deliberately, discreetly cut into him and he couldn't remember such a thing ever happening.

Now, as he lay awake in the dark, he had a nightmarish vision of being vivisected, as he always imagined might happen if human scientists got a hold of him. But that wasn't the case – he was at home, alive and well. Yet his own family was going to great lengths to keep a secret from him, a secret, he was now convinced, they had discovered sometime during the day that he had been unconscious.

This was altogether too much. His silent frustration rolled off of him and beat at the walls of his small room. There was no way he would sleep tonight. He needed to get out of here, needed to roam the streets alone, as he always did when emotion threatened a stranglehold. He climbed silently out of bed. He employed every skill of silence he possessed as a ninja to slip out the door. He was sure that if someone woke, there was no way he'd be allowed to leave.

The streets, though never empty, were quieter this late at night. The air was slightly balmy, unusually warm for this time of year. Summer was coming early, it seemed. He climbed to the roof of a nearby apartment building. There was some wind up here, whipping gently

at his coat and bandana. He perched at the edge of the rooftop and surveyed the city skyline capped with a half moon just above the skyscraper spires. The panoramic scene that he normally found calming did not impress him tonight. He was still too wrapped up in his disturbing thoughts.

Tomorrow he would confront them, find out exactly what was going on. The idea stung; his own family, the individuals with whom he trusted his life, were keeping him in the dark. But they couldn't evade him tomorrow. Or could they? Would they lie to his face? The thought pricked at the corners of an angry insecurity. They didn't *trust* him. They never had. Leo had said so bluntly enough on more than one occasion.

He ran across the rooftop. He leapt easily to another patch of roof a few feet below. Rooftop travel was an art he'd developed through long practice. He knew which rooftops he could and couldn't reach from other rooftops throughout New York. He had routes mapped out in his mind that would let him run for miles without having to set foot on the street. He thought of it as his own private track.

He realized he was taking a path that led to the spot where he and his brothers had fought the ex-Foot ninjas a couple weeks ago. He didn't question the motive. Maybe he just wanted to see the place, to confirm that he remembered those events actually happening.

He climbed down a fire escape and dropped to the pavement. He paced the length of the alley. It felt vaguely familiar. He stood in the spot he last remembered before the unseen blow had put him out of action for the rest of the night. Pivoting in place, he tried to imagine how one of those second-rate ninjas could possibly have taken him by surprise.

Something strange caught his attention. The brick wall across from him had its fair share of graffiti, but the most recent piece of urban art was a bold red circle enclosing the black silhouette of a clawed hand. Raphael stared at the painted symbol. He'd never seen it before (he could recognize the logos of almost all the major street

gangs), but its slight resemblance to the Foot emblem unnerved him nevertheless. He walked up and touched it. To his surprise, the paint was wet; it stained his fingers. Whoever had put this here had done so very recently, perhaps only minutes before Raphael had arrived. Raph took a closer look. Underneath the symbol, a single Japanese character had been drawn with a thick black marker.

Raphael crouched for a moment, looking for spots of paint that had fallen to the pavement. He looked for recently disturbed gravel. Then he stood, turned determinedly in one direction, and broke into an easy loping gait.

Raphael could track the streets of New York as adeptly as a bushman could the African plains. He imagined how he might travel if he were the graffiti artist. He avoided the busier streets and came across two more of the bright emblems before he saw the man himself, aerosol cans in hand, decorating another wall a few blocks from where Raphael had begun his hunt.

Raphael moved like a fast and silent shade. Had he asked himself why he was acting as he was, he probably wouldn't have been able to exactly say. For some reason, he felt it had something to do with whatever it was that no one wanted him to discover. He plucked the spray can away from the man with casual effortlessness.

The graffiti artist whirled faster than Raph expected. A small dagger appeared in his hand. His face was a white oval of angry surprise.

Raphael tossed the can over his shoulder. It bounced off the sidewalk and rolled down the street. "You're damaging public property," he said with a sneer.

The vandal leveled a murderous gaze at Raph's trench coated figure. He was a lean Asian teenager, wearing jeans and tight black T-shirt. "Fuck you," he spat.

Raph jerked his head toward the wall. "Nice art. What does it mean?"

The teen's mouth curved into an ugly shape. "It means you're dead, motherfuc-"

Raphael caught the knife arm as it darted towards him. He twisted it adeptly, but the young man moved with the momentum, throwing a double strike towards Raph's neck that the turtle blocked instinctively. The teen slipped from Raphael's grasp and leapt aside like a cat.

So the kid was a ninja. A young and inexperienced one but ninja-trained nevertheless. It was obvious now from the way he moved. Raphael felt mild surprise muted by a rising bloodlust. Ninjas were a rare breed. In New York, ninja meant Foot. And Raphael liked the Foot only when they weren't breathing.

He sprang after the young man, who moved to meet him with a flash of his dagger blade. Raphael evaded the weapon but let his opponent get in close. In a single motion, he drew a sai, caught the dagger against its prongs and plucked the weapon from the teen's hand with a neat snap of his wrist. The kid was a lot less confident without his knife. He threw a series of rapid and unsuccessful blows at Raphael and tried to dodge past him. The turtle caught him and struck him twice in the sternum. The ninja doubled over and Raphael shoved him against the wall.

Don't kill him! Raphael's inner voice deflected the sai from the man's throat into the mortar next to it.

"Now, I'm going to ask you some simple questions," he stated in a low voice.

The young man stared into Raphael's menacing green face in disbelief and horror. " *You* ," he breathed hoarsely. "It's impossible. It-it *can't* be."

"Yeah it can." He grabbed the teen's mess of black hair and forcibly turned the head toward the unfinished red and black symbol. "Tell

me what that means. If you know who I am, you know it's a good idea to answer."

The young ninja's Adam's apple quivered. "It's- the- the symbol of my clan."

"Your clan is the Foot Clan," Raphael snarled.

The teen shrank into himself. "No. Not anymore."

"Then what-"

Raphael didn't have a chance to finish. He sensed movement before he saw it and whirled out of the way. Both sais flew into his hands and he found himself facing two new opponents, one on either side. That was all he could immediately distinguish –everything was a blur of motion as blades clashed, separated, and drove in again. One sai met flesh and he heard a cry. He dove past his injured assailant to gain room to fight, pivoting to face his attackers on more even footing. His eyes blazed murderously in the dim streetlight.

The two men edged back defensively. One of them clutched his bloodied arm. The graffiti artist straightened up behind his two older comrades, gasping with relief at his unexpected rescue. Three against one. Raphael liked the odds. His blood sang with the almost euphoric high of violence.

"It's *him* ," one of the men said with a sharp intake of breath.

There was a heartbeat. Raphael began to move. The man who had spoken made a quick motion and there was a wicked hiss of lethally tipped throwing stars slashing through air.

Raph barely had time to turn. One shuriken whizzed past him and the other two struck his shell harmlessly. By the time he turned back, all three men had made a break for it in different directions, sprinting into shadow. Raphael hesitated a second too long judging which one

to follow and knew immediately that he wouldn't catch any of them now.

He bruised his fist against the brick wall in silent frustration. Even so, the adrenaline was draining from his body and he felt suddenly, inexplicably exhausted. He leaned against the wall to steady a mild dizziness. His whole body ached. He wanted to rest.

After a long moment, he started walking. It was almost dawn. He thought about going home and suddenly remembered why he had stolen out of the lair, unable to sleep in the first place. He'd come out to calm himself down and accomplished the exact opposite. Should he tell Splinter about the strange and violent encounter with the ex-Foot ninjas? Why should he? *They* certainly didn't seem to think it necessary to tell *him* anything. But was there a connection here...?

He walked faster. The morning warmth was starting to seep across the city and he wanted to be off the streets before the sun came up. The night had flown by. He wondered what time it was.

And stopped.

A minute later, he was running.

Casey Jones groaned into his pillow and hit the snooze button on his alarm clock. It didn't turn off. He glared at it blearily. The alarm clock wasn't ringing. It was the doorbell.

"Who the hell?" he wondered aloud as he staggered out of bed. "It's not six in the morning yet."

The ringing had become an insistent pounding. "Who is it?" he yelled.

"Let me in," Raphael demanded.

He unlocked the door and let the turtle in. Raph stormed into the small apartment like a bat out of hell. He had a pale yet frenzied expression, and Casey suspected that he'd been up all night.

"Hey, what the hell is going on?" Casey asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Raph replied with a barely maintained levelness to his voice. "Give me a newspaper."

"A what?"

"A *newspaper* ," Raphael repeated impatiently. "You have one, don't you?"

"Uh... I threw out yesterday's..."

Raph rummaged in the recycle bin. He yanked out the previous day's paper and stared at it for a good long time. Casey fidgeted in the silence. The phone rang.

Raphael threw the paper on the table and stalked into the living room. The phone continued to ring. Casey picked it up. From the other room, he heard the television turn on and the banal stream of oldies music that accompanied the listings channel.

"Yeah," Casey said into the phone. "Yeah, he's here."

Raphael appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. Icily, he said, "Tell him I'm on my way home."

"He's on his way. He'll be there in a bit." Casey hung up.

Raphael's face was locked in a smoldering expression that bordered bewilderment and anger. "You knew about this?" he asked.

"Yeah." Casey sighed in defeat.

Raphael turned on his heel and headed for the door. "You're supposed to be my friend," he said accusingly.

"I am, Raph. Really."

By the time he got home, he didn't know whether to be exhausted or enraged. A sense of unreality had begun to set in.

Michelangelo practically jumped in his seat when Raphael banged into the kitchen unannounced. Raph sat down in his chair and looked at the three faces around the table. Their expressions were frozen in wary expectation. He pinned his gaze on Leonardo. Underneath the table, his hands were clenched to the point of being painful.

"You want to say something to me, Leo?" he asked.

"Eat something first," Leonardo offered.

Raph was famished, but he shook his head. "Not hungry."

A long pause. Leo picked up an orange and began to peel it. "Why did you sneak out last night?" he asked.

Raph shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

Leo bit his lip in a rare gesture of uncertainty. "We were about to go out and look for you, you know. You should have told us."

"What would you have said?" Raph shot back. "You wouldn't have *let* me go, would you?"

"Raph," Leo said, obviously trying to pick his words carefully. "I know this seems odd-"

"What day is it?"

Donatello started, but Raph kept his eyes on Leo. "Tuesday," Leo answered.

Raph shook his head, his lips pulled back in an awful grimace. "What *date* is it?"

Leo blanched. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

Mike reached for Raph's arm. "Raph, we can explain," he said desperately.

Raph jerked away from Michelangelo's hand and stood up abruptly, knocking the chair over with a loud crash. He glared at his brother, his best friend. "You know what day it is, don't you Mike? It's May seventh! I didn't get knocked out for a day, I was unconscious for *three weeks!* "

"Technically, I said 'over a day,'" Don volunteered weakly.

Raph wheeled on him. "That's not the same as *three weeks* !" he shouted. "And our TV's busted on *purpose* , isn't it Don?"

Don nodded his head miserably. "Believe me, we were going to tell you."

"Like hell you were!" he backed away from them, trembling with hurt and anger. "You kept me in the fuckin' dark all this time!" he raged. "You roped April and Casey into it too. I've got goddamn scars under my shell that I can't explain. *What the fuck is going on?* "

"If you will calmly sit down, Raphael, and allow your brothers a chance to speak, you will find out." Splinter stood in the doorway. His eyes were full of grief.

Part Two: Revelations

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Part Two: Revelations

5 weeks earlier.

"Those are the ones," Mike confirmed. "Ex-Foot and up to no good."

There was some sort of deal going on. From his rooftop vantage, Leo could see money being exchanged by the men in the alley below.

Raphael whistled low under his breath. "That is a lotta dough," he said hungrily. He tensed, ready to move. He could swing himself over the fire escape and be in the midst of the group in less than five seconds. "We can take them right now," he declared.

Leonardo shook his head. "We wait this one out."

With the deal concluded, the men began to disperse. The two members of the Big Toe started walking north. Leo nodded a signal and the four turtles fanned out, moving into well-understood positions. Raph and Mike climbed down swiftly to street level and tailed their quarry at a discreet distance. Leo and Don moved equally quickly to separate rooftop perches.

Gargoyle-like, Leonardo watched the two men and the two turtles who trailed them, shrunk to Lego-figure size. The men turned left at a street corner. Leo cupped his hands to his mouth and made a short warbling sound that carried faintly to the street below. His two brothers turned left at the junction without breaking pace.

They were moving out of range. Don would take over for the next few blocks. Leo sprang lightly to his feet and ran across the rooftop. The next building over was a short enough distance away that he

rappelled across easily. Listening to Don's signals, he moved into a likely lookout point, scanned the street intently, and spotted Mike and Raph several stories below. So where were the men? Leo's gaze took in the patchwork of city intersections, trying to locate them. He couldn't have lost-

No, there they were. Not moving in the right direction though. Backtracking slowly - one of them talking into a cell phone? Leo's eyes swept back across the street. Now he saw it, over half a dozen men moving too quickly and in too well-coordinated a fashion.

Leonardo's loud, sharp call of warning reached his brothers on the ground seconds before their attackers did. Michelangelo turned, saw the first of them coming, and flicked two shuriken in rapid succession. He heard a cry of pain, and the nearest man reeled back, giving Mike enough time to bridge the intervening distance and catch him in the throat with two well-aimed blows of his nunchuku. As his opponent fell with a satisfying thud, Mike side-stepped right, dividing the group of assailants in half with his position, knowing without seeing that Raphael would protect his flank and handle the other side of the fight.

The two men he faced now edged back hesitantly. Mike grinned, taunting them with a playful spin of his nunchuku. "What are you waiting for?"

They moved in together. Mike's weapon wrapped around the first man's club and tore it from him. Spinning out of the way of an incoming blade, he caught the second ninja in the small of the back with a blinding roundhouse kick, knocking him into his weaponless cohort. They recovered faster than he would have given them credit for. He moved in close and doubled one of them over with two rapid blows. Finding a firm grip behind the neck, he swept the fighter's legs out from under him and flung him to the ground. The man's head smacked against the pavement and he stayed down.

His remaining adversary looked no older than sixteen or seventeen. As the teen wet his lips and held tight to his short sword, Mike could

see in his face that he knew he didn't stand a chance, but was too proud to retreat. Well, might as well get this over with. Mike motioned casually for him to attack and shook his head in amusement when the kid actually did so. The turtle sidestepped just in time to let the slashing sword miss him by inches, then brought his nunchuku down on the fighter's wrist. The sword clattered to the concrete and the young man stumbled back, holding his arm, his mouth working like a fish. This time, when Mike feinted a move towards him, he ran-

Straight into Raphael, who somewhat irritably nailed him with a back-fist strike to the face. Between the quick work of the two turtles, five men lay quite still, and three more circled, maintaining a wary distance. Raph snorted contemptuously, pinning his predatory gaze on the two nearest fighters. He muttered, "Piece of ca-"

And sprang.

And fell.

A curious 'tink' sound, and Raphael's legs suddenly gave way beneath him. He staggered, then collapsed soundlessly, rolling into the asphalt shoulder-first. Mike leaped forward in astonished alarm, placing himself between his fallen sibling and the sudden onslaught of all three attackers.

His nunchuku became whistling blurs as they fended off blows from both sides. He caught one man across the chin, sending him sprawling back. A club came down hard on Mike's shoulder and the length of his arm went numb. Biting down, he lashed out with a fierce spin kick, forcing his opponents back.

Leonardo was there suddenly, his katana slicing upward in a glinting arc that gouged one fighter from hip to opposing shoulder. The man pitched over in bloodied shock. His companions took one look at the two turtles, saw Donatello racing up from the other side of the street, and fled.

Leo considered pursuing them, then dismissed the idea. Donatello reached the scene, glanced at the retreating figures, then knelt to examine the silent heap that was Raphael. He held the back of his hand near Raph's mouth, felt steady breath, then turned him over slowly.

"He just fell," Mike explained anxiously, "out of the blue."

"A dart," Don muttered. He found the needle-like weapon lodged in Raphael's upper right arm and pulled it out. It trailed a thin trickle of blood.

"Here's another one," Mike exclaimed, picking his discovery off the pavement gingerly. "This one must have hit his shell."

"Hang on to it," Leo said. "Wrap it up in your bandana so you don't prick yourself." His expression was dark. Splinter had told them of the terrifying array of poisons that ninjas were known to use. Some knocked a victim out for twenty minutes; others killed instantly. Despite seeing Raphael's chest rise and fall rhythmically, Leo stooped and touched his brother's warm arm as if to reassure himself.

"He seems okay right now," Don said hopefully.

"Let's get him home."

Raphael didn't reawaken that night, even though they took turns watching over him in case he did. They tried to rouse him the next morning, but he remained utterly unresponsive, his skin clammy to the touch. Splinter sat by his side and although he wore a look of parental concern that the turtles had seen many times, Leo got the impression that his sensai was more worried than he let on. Blood, dislocated joints, even broken bones they could understand, but Raphael had simply fallen into a sudden and mysterious coma.

"What do you think they drugged him with, Splinter?" Mike asked in a quiet voice. He had gotten edgier as the night had passed, and had slept little.

The elderly rat shook his head. "It is difficult to say, Michelangelo." He fell silent, thinking furiously. "The Foot Clan is not known for its expertise in poisons, but it is obvious that this is not a simple tranquilizer. I fear it may be something I have no knowledge of."

It was not what they wanted to hear. Like many ninjas, they had been deliberately and gradually exposed during childhood to small quantities of common ninja poisons and had developed a degree of resistance to them. Any ordinary sedative would not have had such an immediate effect on Raphael, nor kept him unconscious for so long. And if Splinter didn't know what it was…

Don scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Then what do we do?" he asked, speaking for all of them.

Leonardo looked up at the clock. It was almost noon. He desperately regretted letting those two men escape last night. If only they had something to go on… "Mike," he said, "where did you put that other dart?"

"April O'Neil?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Yes?"

"It's Karen Walker from the New York Central Hospital medical lab. I'm just calling about that sample you sent us a couple days ago."

"Could you hang on a second?"

April put down the sheaf of papers she had been flipping through, walked to her office door and closed it gently. "Hi, go ahead," she said into the phone.

"Well, I've got say, I haven't seen anything like this before. You mentioned this was for a story you were covering?" Walker's voice was skeptical. "Can I ask how you got a hold of it?"

"I'm doing an investigative report on organized crime in the city, specifically Asian gangs." She pressed on quickly, not allowing the other woman to think too long on her explanation. "So what did you find?"

"I can't imagine any punk kid having access to this," Walker replied after a moment's hesitation. "The sample you sent me is very interesting. It contains a concentrated tranquilizer that would knock someone out immediately, but only for a few hours. That's mixed in with an inhibitory drug that acts on the hypothalamus."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it would rapidly drop your body temperature to dangerously low levels."

April let out a measured breath. Abruptly dropping a victim's body temperature – it was surely meant to kill a human. But for a reptile, such a drop would be like winter hibernation. She felt her nervousness start to edge into giddy relief. "Is that it?"

"No, there's more. The third component is a toxin that causes chronic inflammation of key organs, specifically the kidneys. It's a slow-working but deadly poison. Even if the drop in body temperature didn't kill you, you'd be dead in two to three weeks."

"I have heard of such a poison," Splinter said quietly, almost to himself.

"You have?" April's voice quavered slightly. She now knew what doctors felt like when they walked out of hospital rooms to break the news to unfortunate families. The faces around her still registered

nothing more than shocked disbelief. None of the turtles had said anything.

"Yes," the elderly rat continued. "It is called Blackroot poison. It is used in difficult assassinations. The dart is meant to kill, but not quickly. At first, the victim will appear to have merely fainted and fallen ill, so by the time of death, it would be too late to identify and capture the assassin." Splinter's hands tightened in dismay around his walking stick.

"But there must be a way to cure it!" Michelangelo cried.

"There are medications that might help," April said, having checked into it already. "But they'd have to be administered by a doctor right away, and even then there's no guarantee."

It had been- what?- five days now. All that time, they had been waiting, not knowing, while the toxin went to work on Raphael's system.

"But- there has to be- I mean- can't we-" Mike articulated helplessly.

"What? Take him to a hospital? Call the paramedics?" Leonardo's tone was acidic. He stood and paced behind the couch, his rigid expression etched with lines of strain. April felt a surge of compassion for him; this was not something that he could fight, not something that his impeccable ninja training could defend against.

Donatello's eyes followed Leo across the room, but didn't seem to be focused on him. "It makes no sense," he said to no one in particular. "Why a poison that takes weeks to kill? I'm sure they could have used something that would act much faster."

Mike looked stricken. "Then it would be even more hopeless."

Don nodded. "So why? Why give us hope, when, after what April's told us, there isn't much of any?"

Leo had stopped to look at Don. "What're you saying, Don?" he asked, in a way that suggested he already knew the answer.

Don picked agitatedly at a strand of loose thread on the arm of the sofa. "Think about it, guys. They wanted to kill one of us. But if Raph were dead right now, we wouldn't be sitting here; we'd be going after them." He said all this matter-of-factly. "Instead, if they suppose we have no way of finding out what the poison or the antidote is, they can count on us spending the next few weeks caring for him and hoping in vain."

"Until it's too late to identify or capture the killer," Mike echoed Splinter's words. "But if you're saying this is a diversion, what's it for?"

"Perhaps a way for our enemies to buy time," Splinter mused.

"They must be planning something," Leonardo added. "Some way to organize themselves, or grow stronger. And in the meantime, we're kept occupied."

"Well if that's the plan," Mike said, in quiet fury, "it's working."

There was long, troubled silence. April felt speechlessly tied to her seat, invisible to the four mutants. Despite how much they cared for her, despite the fact that she was their closest human friend, they rarely talked like this in front of her, and did so now only because the situation was dire and she had been the one to notify them. She realized she often viewed them through a lens of something almost like normalcy - a family of four young, athletic, good-humored, green-skinned brothers and their sweet elderly father. Perhaps out of consideration for her (and Mike's quick, guilty glance at her seemed to confirm this), it wasn't as often that she saw them only as ninjas, who held family war councils, and spoke frankly of death and violence.

"Master, you said you've heard of this poison," Don said slowly. "Have you ever heard of an antidote?"

"There may be one," Splinter conceded. "The ninjas who specialize in poisons would also be knowledgeable about the cures."

"But none of us is an expert," Don said. "Not even you, Master."

Splinter sagged. "No, as much as I wish it were otherwise."

Don's eyebrow ridges drew downwards as he mulled this over. All eyes had turned to him. "Maybe we can find one," he said.

"I don't like this."

"Neither do I, Mike," Leo said quietly.

They approached the compound with no pretense at concealment. It was a decidedly disconcerting sensation. Mike felt painfully aware of how vulnerable they were, walking across open ground, visible to every Foot member who'd like to see them six feet under.

The sentries at the front gate moved forward defensively. There was no mistaking their posture. They had their hands on the hilts of their weapons, their surprise at seeing the unwelcome visitors tempered by a readiness to fight and perhaps die as so many of their comrades had in the past.

Leonardo slowed and drew his katana well before they reached the men. The response was instantaneous – there was an eager rasp of steel as all three guards unsheathed their weapons. As they sprang forward to attack, Leo's voice rang out loud and clear.

"Foot Clan ninja! I seek a peaceful audience with the your mistress, the Lady Karai." He bowed deeply, his twin katana proffered without malice, resting on upraised palms.

Mike felt his breath catch in his chest and the tableau before him slow to a crawl. He stayed three paces behind and to the left of Leonardo. Every sinew in his body was coiled. Even so, the Foot

ninja could move as swiftly as he, and, in the span of time it would take to close three paces, might bring their blades down on Leo's unguarded neck.

They didn't. They paused, still on guard, obviously conflicted. Mike could sense that they thought this was some kind of trick, some clever deception. But Leo remained motionless, katana still held in front of him, eyes still downcast. They glanced at Mike nervously, but he made no motion to come forward or draw his nunchuku.

The guards exchanged quick words in Japanese. They spoke too quickly and in voices too low for Mike to hear them clearly. But he caught the gist; as much as they'd like to, there was no honorable way to kill the turtle without hearing him out.

One of the guards took Leo's katana from his hands, his comrades looking on suspiciously, ready to strike if the turtle suddenly tried to reverse his grip. Leo straightened as he felt his swords taken from him. "I ask for an audience with Lady Karai," he repeated, his gaze resting unwaveringly on the three men before him.

The guard who'd disarmed him said curtly, "She will not see you, *kappa* dog."

"Ask her," Leonardo requested, unperturbed. "I have come in peace and am unarmed."

The guards exchanged glances, considering amongst themselves. One man turned and hurried back into the compound. The others stood their ground, regarding the two turtles with open revulsion and fascination. They had surely not expected to ever get this close a look at their legendary enemies without being locked in deadly combat.

The wait seemed interminable. Leo stood patient as a rock, but Mike could feel his unease resurfacing. How could Don and Leo think that this hare-brained idea would work? He fought down a cold creeping dread; they had to try. Leo had been right about that.

The guard returned and said a few words in Japanese that Mike understood before the lead ninja relayed the message. "She agrees to see you," he said in a tone that made clear his disappointment in the matter.

Leo nodded in acknowledgement. He shot Michelangelo a quick, confirming glance. Mike backed away, slipping under the cover of a nearby tree, still in clear view of the guards. He would wait an hour at the most. The presence of a witness, one that would certainly swear vengeance on behalf of his whole family, might deter the Foot from trying anything that they would later regret. Or it might not. The thought did not comfort Michelangelo as he watched his sibling being led through the gates of the Foot compound.

As they escorted him into the building and down a long hall, Leonardo fought back the overwhelming sense of apprehension that threatened to ruin the expert calm he was determined to project. Everything was quiet, seemingly peaceful. Still he felt the tension, as thick as fog lying low over the clean tatami mats. *I am in Foot territory* , he reminded himself. *They don't like me here any more than I like being here.*

Two guards walked with him, maintaining a distance out of either consideration or wariness, he wasn't sure. Their faces were covered with ninja masks. They were armed and he was sure that they would cut him down in a heartbeat should he make any untoward movement.

They stopped before a set of simple wooden doors. Two sentries pulled the doors open and Leonardo stepped inside.

He did not meet her gaze as he came forward. He caught only a glimpse of her long, cream kimono, her hands clasped lightly in front of her, and the pale oval of her high-cheek boned face. He knelt immediately, eyes on the ground in front of him, palms resting respectfully on his thighs. "Lady Karai," he said in formal Japanese, "I am your most humble guest."

He felt her eyes on him like two beams of cold moonlight. "Leonardo. I cannot say that I am surprised. I had a feeling that I had not seen the last of you." He was not intimate enough with the Japanese language to catch the subtleties of tone that might indicate whether or not she was being faintly sarcastic. "Leave us," she said sharply to her guards. Leo heard them slipping away. The door closed behind them, leaving an abrupt and uncomfortable silence. He remained kneeling.

"Come now," she said in English. "Stand up. Let there not be this formality." There was a rustle of cloth as she made a motion with her hand.

He rose to his feet and looked up at her. She seemed older, wearier than he remembered. Her long black hair was drawn up in an intricate bun. He reminded himself that she was a ninja master, as ruthless and calculating as they come.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" she asked.

He paused deferentially. "I need your help."

"Is that so?" She remained expressionless.

"I need the antidote to Blackroot poison." His voice was as even as he could have hoped for.

She fixed him with a steely gaze. "You have been fighting ex-Foot. One of your comrades has been wounded."

He nodded.

The corner of her mouth twitched so slightly that he wondered if he'd imagined it. She looked through the frosted window at the multitudinous glitter of city lights. "Surely you realize the position you put me in." Her blunt tone carried with it an undercurrent of anger. "I am the leader of a clan that hates and reviles you. There are many

that would like to have an excuse to see me thrown from power in dishonor. Do you think I would give it to them?"

"Karai," he pleaded in a low voice, "I wouldn't have come if I didn't need it as badly as I do."

"Why should I aid you? You, who played the greatest part in the downfall of the New York Foot. Who left me with this," she waved her arm to encompass the compound, "the wretched remains of a clan."

He did not allow himself to feel defensiveness or sympathy. Instead he launched into the argument he'd rehearsed in his mind. "The Foot may hate us, but you and I have a common enemy now. The Foot deserters that my brothers and I fought weren't the only ones. They're planning, they're organizing themselves-"

"I know," she cut in. Her lips curved sardonically. "Until recently, the deserters have not been a problem. When caught, they were punished. But yes, now there are enough of them that they are aligning themselves against me. The leader of the Big Toe has been calling for the formation of a new clan, which he calls the Rising Hand."

This he had not expected. He paused, thrown off by the direction the conversation had taken. Finally he asked, "Do you think he will succeed?"

"Perhaps. He claims that the new clan will be a fresh start, younger and supposedly more modern, not accountable to the Foot or the old ways." She sighed delicately. "He appeals to the discontented in our ranks."

He averted his eyes at the unexpected defeat in her voice. "Why do you remain her, Karai?"

"The Elders in Japan have decided." She could not hide her bitterness. "Someone must assume the disgrace of the New York branch. Its downfall will be mine."

"It doesn't have to be." He saw the opening and went for it fervently. "You asked why you should help me. Give me the antidote; I will be in your debt and I swear that you will have us as allies. We'll do everything we can to help you destroy the Rising Hand." Leo searched her face for any sign that his earnest words affected her. "It's not too late to reassert your leadership."

He held his breath, studying her reaction. The light from the window bisected her face into smooth ebony on one side and dark shadow on the other. He wondered what was going through her mind. But her eyes betrayed nothing, except perhaps, a trace of regret.

"You paint a pretty picture, turtle," she responded after a moment's silence. "But I will strike no bargain that I cannot honorably fulfill." She turned away from him. "Blackroot poison is rare and its antidote even rarer. I cannot help you."

"There must be Foot ninja that are experts in poisons and who know the antidote," he insisted, barely keeping the desperation from his voice.

"Yes," she agreed, "There are. But in America, only one who is skilled enough to give you what you want."

"Who?"

"Saito Doshida," she replied. "The man who now leads the Big Toe. My enemy and yours." She smiled in sad humor. "So you see, there is nothing I can do to help you even if I wanted to. Your brother is as good as dead."

They walked home in silence. Karai, true to her word, had Leo escorted out unmolested and his katana returned. Mike was visibly relieved to see him safely outside the Foot compound, although the news that Leo brought out with him had erased the momentary happiness rather quickly.

"What do we do now?" Mike asked miserably.

Leo pursed his mouth into a grim line. "We find Saito Doshida."

It took them three days.

Leonardo had spread a map of downtown Manhattan across the kitchen table and methodically marked out the area within a four-block radius of where the fight had occurred a week ago. He reasoned that they had been attacked because they had come a little too close to comfort, and the upstart ninja clan must have a hideout or base of operations nearby.

Each night, the three turtles divided up a number of surveillance targets and scoured the streets for any sign of ninja activity. It was tiring, nerve-wracking work. The necessity of covering as much ground as possible with only three team members dictated that they split up, working most of the night alone. Leonardo had been brutally conscious of how risky the situation was; Splinter and Raphael unguarded at home, and the three of them roaming solo in hostile territory. He set up numerous checkpoints where they would meet at specified times during the night, and ran the whole operation with a military precision that heightened rather than lessened the tension of his siblings.

The second night out, Mike saw a scuffle break out between two hoodlums and a single man who trounced both his opponents and escaped unscathed. He followed the man for fifteen minutes before he disappeared into a back alley. There were four buildings with back doors facing into the alley. The next evening, the turtles narrowed their search and Don recalled that one of the buildings, which held some decrepit old office space, had been up for rent less than a month ago and was now occupied. The lights on the second floor were on all night. Almost a dozen people went in and out of the back door and Mike recognized two of them as being among the men that he and Raphael had fought.

The fourth night found the three turtles crouched in shadow a block away from what, they'd decided, was a makeshift ninja headquarters. They'd slept little the previous day despite Master Splinter's several reminders that they would need to be fully alert tonight. It was still quite early- the place looked quiet, they'd only seen a few people enter. They had no idea if Doshida was inside, they weren't even positive that this was the place to find him, but they also didn't have much time or choice at this point.

Leo breathed, letting his gaze unfocus for a minute as he gathered together the cold silence that would wipe his mind of everything except the coming mission. He blinked, brought himself back into reality and said, "Let's go."

As far as they could tell, there were only three ways to get into the building. The frequently used back door, the rarely used front door that faced onto the larger road, and a set of second-story windows. Leo gave Mike and Don enough time to get into position, then crossed the street, checked to ensure that he was alone, and walked quickly towards the side of the building, slipping his hands into a set of climbing spikes as he did so. Breaking into a run, he springboarded off a dumpster and swung himself under the eaves. He kicked back forcefully, hauled himself up, gymnast-like, and rolled onto the narrow outcropping of tile roof. It was short climb to the window ledge. A quick glance told Leo that the room was lit, but empty. The window itself was not in the least ninja-proof; it had a roll-out style mechanism that cranked it open from the bottom, and it had been left slightly ajar. Leo gripped the bottom of the window, reached into the narrow opening and snapped the hinge. The window swung open easily and he dropped into the room with a whisper of night air.

As luck would have it, the door opened and two men stepped inside.

Leonardo glimpsed the look of shock on their faces as he flew at them. He sailed past the first man, clothes-lining him across the throat and whipping his head around into the solid wooden door frame. The second man turned to run and took two steps before Leo slammed him against the plaster wall.

"Doshida. Where is he?" Leo asked, his hand vise-like on the man's throat.

His captive shook his head to the extent that he could, his eyes bulging. Leo could feel the man's pulse thudding against his palm. "Last chance," he said with equanimity, and reached for his katana.

The man pointed vigorously at the ceiling. 'Upstairs' he mouthed soundlessly.

Leo's elbow struck the man across the temple, knocking him unconscious. He raced up the stairs, keeping his excitement in check. He could only hope that the ninja had told the truth, and that Doshida was here at all. A sizable commotion could be heard downstairs, which meant Don and Mike had breached and bolted the entrances and were making their way inward. The whole place would be up in arms in seconds.

He met two more opponents in the hallway at the top of the stairs. They must have heard the noise because they reacted must faster than their comrades downstairs. They rushed at him, and in the cramped quarters, the hand-to-hand combat became messy quickly. One man staggered back, drooling blood and holding the jaw that Leo had shattered with his fist. The second ninja was more skilled; he drew a sai and Leo was hard pressed to dodge a jab that would have blinded him. The man was a quick and furious fighter, throwing blinding sai techniques that Leonardo blocked, but not without effort. They reminded him of Raphael. He let the man back him up to the top of the stairs, waiting for and seizing the opportunity to catch the sai arm at an angle that threw his opponent off balance. A quick thrust kick sent the man tumbling down the steps. Donatello hopped up behind the ninja as he got back up and sent his bo into the back of the man's head.

There was a locked door at the end of the hallway. Leo kicked it in and leapt into the room, drawing his katana in a single, fluid motion.

In the center of the room, a man was standing behind a desk, unsurprised to see him. He looked to be in his late twenties, with handsome, well-defined features. He wore tailored pants and a smart black golf shirt.

"You're Saito Doshida," Leo said.

"You're quite right," the man replied in perfect English. "And you must be Leonardo." He raised his arm and leveled a handgun at the turtle's chest.

Leonardo knew that as skilled a ninja as he was, he couldn't dodge a bullet at near point-blank range. His blood froze; he waited for the gunshot, and the harpooning pain that would end his life.

"Don't come a hair closer and we'll both stay in one piece. Stay where you are!" he barked as Don burst into the room, Mike right behind him. The two turtles barely halted themselves as Saito's finger tensed around the trigger. "If you attack now," he declared, "you will still kill me, but not before I get at least one, maybe two of you." His eyes flicked across the tense faces of his reptilian intruders. "Sheath your weapons and we'll talk."

Leonardo held the man's steely gaze and returned his swords to their scabbards with careful deliberateness. There was a rustle as his brothers likewise replaced their weapons. Doshida kept his gun trained on the middle of Leonardo's chest. Leo's expression was ugly. "You'd shoot us rather than face us in honorable combat," he said in disgust.

Doshida smiled humorlessly. "You're being overly dramatic. We ninjas were among the first to invent projectile weapons, after all. But let's converse on equal terms." He placed the gun on his desk, within easy reach. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to find me."

"You know why we're here," Don said.

"Of course. How is he? Your brother, I mean."

Mike took an angry step forward and Saito's hand moved warningly towards his weapon. "I don't mean to be callous," he added quickly. "I merely trust he's still alive."

Leo's eyes narrowed. "If he dies, so do you."

"Let's not jump ahead of ourselves. We would all like to avoid that situation. Truth be told, I have been wanting the opportunity to speak to you." He paused, oddly conversational despite the fact that three mutant ninjas had just disabled all his men and stormed into his office. "You may not realize it, but we're natural allies."

"Oh really." Don was scornful. "And how's that?"

"We want the same thing. The ultimate downfall of the Foot Clan."

They were taken aback. "We've made peace with the Foot," Leo told him stiffly.

"You've made peace with Karai," Doshida corrected. "The Foot Clan is another matter. Do you really think that the Foot will forget about you? You killed Oruku Saki, their greatest ninja and leader in recent memory. The Foot Clan is unlikely to ever see another like him."

"You sound like a big fan."

Saito chuckled. "Would I be talking to you if I were? No, as great as the Shredder was for the New York Foot, he belongs in a past generation. So does Karai. She won't remain in power for long. And that means you won't remain safe for long."

"Because of you. You've been trying to stage some sort of rebellion."

Doshida shrugged amiably.

"You won't succeed," Leo said. "Even if the Foot in New York fail to defeat you, the Elders in Japan-"

"Overrated."

The turtles had no response. Here was a young ninja, callously dismissing what he must have been taught was sacred.

Saito seemed to deduce their thoughts. He said, "I've been to Japan to study, but I was born here in New York, an American, like you. My father was an upper-echelon member of the Foot, as was his father, and his father before him. My family was one of the very few in the Clan that specialized in the art of ninja poisons. I graduated from Tokyo University with a Chemistry degree. But while in Japan, I came to realize something.

"Ninjitsu is a dying art. There are no more feudal lords, no more samurai. It's amazing we've lasted this long, really. The Foot Clan is the most powerful of the few clans that are left, but it is run by old men and there are not enough young men to take their place."

"You're a ninja yourself," Mike pointed out.

"True. But tell me, how many of the ninjas you've encountered are half as skilled as you three? Not very many I'd wager. I'm not surprised that you're as good as they say you are. You've been raised in the ninja tradition, perhaps more strictly than any human on the continent.

"Most of these men you fought tonight still have day jobs to go to. Being a ninja doesn't pay the bills," he mused. "Fewer and fewer families are passing on the old teachings. After all, it's much more respectable and lucrative for your children to become doctors or lawyers." He gestured unthreateningly towards the gun on the table. "It's much easier to get a gun than an authentic katana."

"If you're so convinced that ninjitsu is doomed, then your little uprising is pointless," Donatello told him.

"No, you don't understand. I'm not trying to replace the Foot with yet another archaic ninja clan." His voice rose with conviction. "It's ninja culture, not ninja skills, that are outdated. The whole clan system, this blind devotion to a way of life that's long dead… it's ludicrous.

Look at the Foot Clan, still prancing around in black pajamas and kimonos, running protection rackets and trafficking stolen goods." He shook his head in contemptuous wonder.

Don snorted skeptically. "Why are you giving us this speech if you're trying to kill us?"

"I'm not," Saito countered. "You were following some of my men, and they tried to defend themselves. I never intended that a poison dart be used on one of you, but it happened. Foot or not, most of the ninjas in this city don't like you very much."

"Well then, since this was all a misunderstanding," Mike reasoned, "why don't you give us the antidote to that poison, and we'll be on our way."

Doshida held up a hand. "Hear me out. Ninja skills are still greatly in demand. There are governments and individuals all over the world that would pay dearly to have ninja in their service. Espionage, conflict, intrigue… they're never going out of style." He unlocked a desk drawer and took out three small vials of differing color and placed them on the desktop. "This," he said, pointing to the first vial, "is Blackroot poison. This," he pointed to the next vial, "is an amnesiac that will knock out your memory of the last two to three days. And this is a disinhibitor- a truth serum, if you will. I've been working on them, improving the formula. Can you imagine the price these would fetch given the right audience?" He was getting enthusiastic. "Ninjas were originally a sort of secret society. Why not a young, modern secret society, not based on old feudal clans, but on a well-organized network? It'd be like… let's call it a global consulting practice." He smiled, his mouth and eyes wolfish.

"Whatever your lovely vision is," Leo cut in, unimpressed, "what does it have to do with us?"

Saito looked at them shrewdly. "Our interests are aligned. You can help me."

"Why on earth would we want to do that?"

"Because you want to save your brother's life."

There was a stupefied silence as his words sank in. Leo looked to one side, as if considering something. Then he moved so fast that not even his own brothers anticipated the action. One instant he was motionless, the next, his katana was completing a low horizontal arc that clipped the handgun and sent it clattering across the desk and onto the floor. Doshida's face was a picture of amazement as Leonardo, without missing a beat, took two steps forward and settled the tip of his blade an inch from the man's chest.

"You'll find it harder to play ransom without your gun." Leo tone was cold. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you."

Doshida looked down at the length of steel held unwaveringly close to his torso. He'd paled considerably but he spoke calmly. "Consider your situation," he proposed. "I assure you that I won't give you anything at sword-point. So you can kill me now, and have your premature vengeance, but your brother will be dead within a week. Or you can listen to what I have to say." Saito swallowed nervously. His eyes flicked beseechingly to Donatello and Michelangelo's unsympathetic faces. "Unless I'm wrong about you, you won't kill me unless I refuse to give you the antidote, and I'm not doing that. I'm willing to trade."

"You're a liar," Leo replied. "And for all intent, a murderer. Or else you engineered this knowing you could hold our brother's life hostage."

Saito shook his head. "Then what's stopping you?"

Leo ran his tongue over his teeth. On either side of him, Mike and Don glanced anxiously at him and at the tip of the katana that he could, with a flick of his wrist, send sliding between Saito's ribs.

Slowly, Leonardo withdrew his sword, though he still held it poised. "What do you want?"

"I have been trying to unify those who are disenchanted with life in the Foot. There are a quite a few of them, but those who leave often become renegades, forming small gangs, and staying out of sight. The Big Toe is the only really organized group, but the only way for us to survive is for all these small factions to come together. Under a new philosophy, a new name."

"The Rising Hand," Leo filled in.

"So you've heard," he said, sounding pleased. "Well, it has proven difficult to unify all the deserters, mostly because of one man. His name is Moro Osaka and he is the leader of one of the resisting factions, although that role is only a ruse. He is Karai's spy."

Leo did not betray the mild surprise that he felt. *Karai, then Saito, and now Moro. Good God, layers upon layers - how did we get into this?* "What's your point?" he pressed.

"Osaka acts under Karai's orders. He will do anything to foil my attempts to organize a reasonable resistance to the Foot, including killing me if need be. I need your help. Kill Osaka. Save my life, and in turn, I will give you the antidote that will save your brother's."

The three turtles wore nearly identical expressions of incredulous anger. "Why you-" Leo breathed, unable to find a word suitably derogatory enough to finish the sentence.

"If you think you can get us to do your dirty work-" Mike exclaimed.

"I would do it myself if I could," Saito insisted quickly. "But I'm powerless and he knows it. If I tried anything, if I were linked to Osaka's death, even through one of my poisons, it would destroy all chance of unifying the ex-Foot. It would be seen as power-hungry in-fighting and I would lose all my influence. Karai knows this. I can go no further right now, which is why I'm still alive."

"And why would we-"

"If on the other hand, he were to fall at your hands, it would merely be an unfortunate run-in. Just another casualty that you bestow on the Foot, after the many that you've already handed them."

"We're not killers in your hire." Leonardo's voice made it clear that he considered his sense of honor to have been insulted. "You're playing with us, bribing us with this antidote that you may not even have."

"I assure you I have it, and you have my word that I will give it to you if you help me this once."

"Your word." Leo repeated. "The word of a gun-toting ninja, a traitor to both his upbringing and his clan."

"The line between being a traitor and visionary is a thin one," Saito said. "I'm trying to advance ninjitsu, not destroy it. My word is good."

"So you say."

"What have I got to lose? If I don't fulfill my part of the bargain within the next week, your brother dies, and you'll kill me anyway. Time is of the essence for all of us. I can tell you that Osaka will be eating at The Phoenix tomorrow around eight o'clock, like he does every Friday. You can't miss him. He has a long scar across his face, from the corner of his eye to his chin. Your brother, the one with the sais, gave him that scar years ago, back when Osaka was a soldier under Oruku Saki. He was the only one of his squad team to survive. So you see, it's perfectly believable that if he should run into you again, he would try to fight you, and die in combat."

"Sounds like you have it all laid out," Don said.

"I'm risking my life," Doshida protested. "I'm standing here alone against three armed ninjas. You could still kill me where I stand, or torture me, or ransack this building looking for the antidote, or whatever else you might have had in mind. I'm taking the gamble

that you'll see that my offer is the better alternative. If you do, I'll be waiting here, in this same office, two nights from now."

Is this really happening? Michelangelo wondered, staring across Eighth Avenue at the neon outline of a phoenix that hung over the restaurant doors. Things were happening too fast, whirling out of control, and still they couldn't afford to slow down. Mike had almost expected Leo to gut Saito last night, antidote or no antidote, so inarticulately furious had he been about being backed into this predicament. Mike could understand- there were too many ifs, they were grasping at too many straws. If Doshida was telling the truth… if Osaka really was a Foot spy… if the Rising Hand really was the future of ninjitsu… Would Raphael have considered all this, Mike wondered, or would he have plunged his sai into Saito's heart? But that was useless speculation; Raphael was lying quite still at home, his pulse slowly weakening day by day.

Scheming ninja psychos, Michelangelo thought. *They can all rot in the eleventh level of Hell, or whatever it is they believe in.* And Doshida most of all, because he was either calculatingly evil or extraordinarily opportunistic, and Mike didn't know which unnerved him more.

Ten o'clock. The sun had just gone down, leaving a faint afterglow in its wake. The city took no notice; it was endlessly alive. Streams of people entered and exited The Phoenix. Even three pairs of ninja eyes from three different vantage points might not catch a specific man.

But they spotted him. He made it easy by pausing just outside the doors to light a cigarette. Just as Doshida had said, he had a long, upraised scar that ran diagonally across the left side of his face. He was probably in his late thirties, but the scar made him look older. The wound had barely missed blinding him, but had pulled the flesh down in such a way that one eye looked smaller and sadder than the other.

Accompanied by two companions who had left the restaurant with him, Oaska ambled leisurely down the street. One of the men took his leave at the first corner and headed in a different direction. Donatello was closest to the two remaining men. Mike saw him slip into the crowd and follow.

Michelangelo lost sight of them as he headed for a parallel road. He ran up the avenue for three blocks, cut across back to Eighth, and stood on the street corner, keeping well away from the glow of the lights. Across the road, Don checked to see that the street was quiet, then turned his silent pursuit into a full-fledged onrush.

The two men were good ninjas; they sensed Don coming and Osaka's companion threw himself forward to block the bo as it came down. He yelled something, presumably a behest for his friend to make a run for it. Osaka hesitated and half-turned, then leapt back, narrowly avoiding the flash of silver that was Leonardo's katana.

From within his coat, Osaka drew a set of nunchuku and Michelangelo could see why the man had been the only one of his Foot squad to fight Raphael and live to tell about it. In his day, he must have been among the best the Foot had to offer; even caught by surprise he held Leonardo at bay, his weapon moving nimbly and precisely, his stance shifting swiftly and defensively. Mike's hands closed around his own nunchuku. He was supposed to cover his siblings as backup, and it looked like he would have to jump in.

But Donatello's spinning bo broke through his opponent's defenses, striking him hard in the midriff and then across the side of his head with a solid crack. The man slumped unconscious to the pavement, just as Leonardo's sword, in a complex dance of steel, finally snagged Osaka's nunchuku. They flew from him as he dodged the katana blade. It's tip sliced his upper arm. Weaponless and outnumbered, his scarred face flush with sudden horror, he took the only path of escape available to him and raced across the street.

In his panic, he didn't see the third turtle until it was too late. Moving like a wraith, Mike intercepted and swept Osaka off his feet, upper-

cutting him across the chin as he fell. He put a knee between the prone man's shoulder blades and grabbed the ninja's head in his hands. He forced his mind blank and let go quickly when he heard the crack of snapping vertebrae.

Don and Leo ran up. Their faces were grim and devoid of triumph. Leo looked from the body on the ground to Mike's ashen face. "You okay, Mike?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Michelangelo nodded. He took a shuddering breath but didn't meet his brother's eyes. He told himself that the circumstances were no different than any other time that he'd been forced to kill in battle, but he knew better.

Looking up at the old, nondescript building they had visited two nights ago, Michelangelo closed his eyes briefly and offered up a silent plea. *God, let something go right for once. We need this.*

They all climbed in through the second-story window this time. There was little need for stealth; the place was devoid of guards tonight, as Saito had assured them it would be. In fact, it was eerily quiet.

Halfway up the stairs, Leo came to an abrupt halt. The door to Doshida's office was ajar and he could see what was inside. He hurtled up the stairs, Mike and Don hot on his heels, and threw the door open.

Leonardo did something Mike had rarely ever seen him do. He howled in rage. He threw his katana across the room in a senseless fit of violent denial and it gouged a hole in the drywall.

Saito Doshida was nowhere to be seen. A cold and slimy claw wrapped itself around Michelangelo's insides. It was squeezing hard now, as his eyes fell upon the upturned desk, the scattered papers and vials that had once been in it, the broken furniture, the dark spots of blood, and the triumphant round symbol of the Foot Clan drawn crudely on the wall.

Part Three: Decisions

Terms of Allegiance

Part Three: Decisions

Later that night.

"I must speak to her." With effort, Leonardo kept his voice on a thin border between request and insistence. He did not draw his katana, nor did he disarm himself.

The Foot sentries regarded him with even less warmth than they had a week ago. There were four of them tonight. Security, it seemed, had recently become a more pressing concern. The lead ninja spat, "Don't waste your breath, reptile. You're not getting in here."

Leonardo felt his patience fraying. "Listen," he said, stepping forward.

A rush of breath and motion as hands reached for weapons. Leo found himself looking down the length of two wicked pikes deployed a few inches in front of him. Their own weapons drawn, Michelangelo and Donatello had moved to flank him on either side. There were two heartbeats of perfect silence, and then Leo said firmly, "We're not leaving here until I have a chance to speak to her."

"Suit yourself," the Foot soldier replied contemptuously. "It makes no difference. We have been ordered to let no one enter." He fixed a venomous glare on Leonardo. " *Especially* you."

Leo's return gaze was a cold smolder. His hand twitched imperceptibly, as if debating whether to leap for the hilt of his katana. " *Karai!* " he hollered up at the lighted windows that lay beyond his reach. Silence. The Foot sentries stared at him in surprise and disdain. "I know you can hear me in there, dammit!"

A single figure stepped out the building, lit by the light in the hallway behind her. She walked unhurriedly to the gates, the folds of her robe barely rustling. As she approached, they saw that she was a serving girl, dressed in a plain kimono. She walked past the Foot soldiers, regarded Leonardo with dispassion, and handed him a single piece of folded paper. With the same unrushed efficiency, she retreated into the compound.

Leonardo unfolded the note and read the words, written in Japanese. *Treason is Death.*

On the other side of the gates was a silent stream of black-clad motion as the compound filled with Foot ninja.

Leo let out a breath that shook barely enough to hint at the fury behind it. The note crumpled in his grip. "Let's go," he said flatly, turning.

"Hey, April," Michelangelo whispered, and bent to hug her where she sat. She opened her mouth to ask a question, but read disaster in his face.

"It's so late," he said. "You're still here."

She rested her face against his bare shoulder as he turned to look at Raphael's immobile figure.

"You've always pulled through," she said, not sure who she was addressing, trying to sound comforting.

Mike sighed. "I'll take you home," he said to her.

Dark. Still night. Something had woken him. He turned, reached for his clock to check the time.

"Dr. Evan Chambers," said a voice in the room.

He bolted straight up. "Who's there?" he yelled. His hand danced for the lamp switch and found it dead. A wave of fear drenched him in cold sweat.

"I need to talk to you."

He lunged for his bedside drawer and yanked it open.

"I took your gun," the voice explained levelly. "Just to be safe."

Dr. Chambers gave a dry swallow and forced himself into the sort of calm that soldiers have before they die. "What do you want from me? I have money. Take what you want…"

"Calm down. I'm not a thief or a serial killer." The voice sounded rational, polite even. "You know me, actually."

His brain stammered.

"Well, to be precise, you haven't ever met me. But you're an avid electronics hobbyist. I'm the one on the usenet group that sent you those specs on building digital speakers."

Confusion and fear vied for attention. "Th-that was months ago," he replied stupidly. "You're…" he struggled to remember, "…Don?"

"Yeah," the voice sounded oddly relieved. "I'm surprised you remember."

Was this some sick Internet stalker? Chambers squinted, trying to gather details that might later help the police. He could barely make out the shape of someone across the room - short, maybe five and a half feet? A resident New Yorker by the accent. "But…how did you find me?" he asked carefully, trying to sound placating. Do not make the psychopath angry.

"When you were chatting online, you mentioned that you were a renal surgeon here in New York. I didn't know your real name, but the email I used to send you those specs was 'emchambers.' So I

pilfered some info from the online Medical Association members database and cross-referenced your name to a list of all practicing renal surgeons in New York hospitals."

"But… why? What do you want from me?" Chambers had started to sweat again.

"This is going to sound extremely odd," Don said. He hesitated. "I have a brother who's going to die in a few days unless he gets medical attention. I need your help."

Chambers didn't think he'd heard correctly. This nutcase had tracked him down over the Internet, broken into his condo, cut his lights, stolen his gun… to ask for help? "I don't understand," he said slowly.

The silhouette across the room shifted nervously. "He's been infected with a toxin that's destroying his kidneys."

Without question, this was the least sane situation he had ever been in. "Look…Don," Chambers said, trying to keep his voice very even, "your brother needs to get to a hospital. How would breaking into my house and scaring the shit out of me in the middle of the night possibly help?"

A long, guilty silence. "I can't take him to a hospital."

"Why not?"

"Because…well, you're not going to believe me, but…I'm not human. Neither is my brother. We have a lot of physiological characteristics in common with humans, but we're, um, terrapin. Turtles."

His brain did not have a response to what his ears told him he'd heard. "Turtles," he repeated blandly.

"Mutant turtles."

"I see." A derisive laugh began to climb inside him. "This is some sort of crazy prank, right?"

"Afraid not," Don said. "I'll turn on the lights, just, try not to overreact, okay?"

The room light snapped on. Chambers flinched at the sudden brightness, then his eyes shot open and he scrambled out of bed, backing hard into his wall. "Jesus!" he yelled.

Don held up a three-fingered green hand in a non-threatening gesture. His expression, if one could read expression on his reptilian face, was one of embarrassed caution. Chambers stared. He couldn't help it. The strange intruder fidgeted, averted his gaze self-consciously.

"Jesus," Chambers repeated.

Don pulled out the desk chair and sat down slowly, running a hand worriedly over his head. "I'm sure this seems really strange."

He nodded.

"Just sit down for a minute and hear me out," Don said, pointing to the bed.

Chambers sat. "What are you?" he whispered.

"What I've told you is true. I'm a mutant turtle. I'm not the only one. We've lived our lives in secrecy and very few people know about us. I'm sorry for giving you a scare, but it's also true what I said about needing your help."

"Why me?" he blurted.

Don shrugged. "You're the only one I could think of. I don't know much about you. I read your bio in the Medical Association database, I know of your credentials, and your work on the ethics committee. But otherwise, I'm taking a leap of faith."

"What are you asking me to do? Smuggle him into the hospital? Even if I could, or would, I can't do an operation by myself! You need

an anesthetist at the least, preferably another surgeon present. And access to an operating room, equipment…"

"It would be tough to pull off," Don admitted. "But if there's even a slight chance it could be done, I'll take it."

This was severely surreal. Chambers blinked, several times, expecting the impossible creature in front of him to vanish into hallucinogenic nothingness. Instead it returned his disbelieving gaze with studious expectation. There was no question it was as solid as the chair it was sitting in, and Chambers was close enough to see the texture of living skin and know that it wasn't merely a man in a costume. "This is crazy," he said. "You can't make me do this."

The line of Don's jaw stiffened. "No, I can't," he concurred, and Chambers thought he heard a barely-controlled dismay in the turtle's next words. "Doctor, you would try to save any human life that you could. I can only hope you see something human enough about me to be worth the same attempt."

Dr. Chambers let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair. Whatever the creature was, it spoke as eloquently as any human, expressed human emotion, and had sought out help as anyone with a dying family member would have done. Chambers recalled once giving an impassioned speech to an audience of fellow medical professionals against the excessive use of intelligent primates in medical testing. And this green stranger was more intelligent than any chimp or gorilla he'd ever seen. "I'd be gambling my career," he stated. "What assurance do I have that you're not some sort of escaped military experiment?"

"Only my word. I can't make you help me, I can't even ask you to understand. But you're my absolute last resort. Trust me, I wouldn't be here unless I was truly desperate. I promise, I'll tell you everything, just tell me that you'll try."

"Leo."

Leonardo looked up. He was sitting on the floor outside Raphael's room, his shell against the wall. "Where've you been?" he asked tiredly. Don mused that his brother looked badly sleep-deprived. They all did.

Donatello sat down on the ground across from Leo. "How's he doing?"

"Dying," Leo replied bluntly. He turned away from the other turtle's pained expression. "Sorry, Don," he said more gently. "It's just…" he rested his forehead in his hands and his voice dropped. "I don't know how we're getting out of this one."

Don rarely saw his brother uncertain or defeated. But he knew he saw it more often than Mike or Raph, or even Splinter, did. Leo was not one to express vulnerability to anyone, not even his own family, but sometimes he confided in the sibling whose keen intelligence, cool head, and unwavering sense of logic he often considered his source of sober second thought.

Don took a steadying breath and said, "Leo, we've got to do something. Something drastic."

Leo raised his head. "What do you mean?"

"We can still save Raph, even without the antidote."

Leonardo fixed upon him a serious, expectant gaze. "How's that?"

"If he gets a kidney transplant. One of us could donate one of ours."

Leo's expression morphed into bewilderment. "Don, you know none of us can do surgery. Not even you."

"We could find a surgeon. We could take him to a hospital."

Don watched his brother's face fall. Leo thought that the stress had made him lose his grip on reality. "Don, you know we can't," Leo replied softly. "We don't even know a doctor."

"There's a renal surgeon in New York Central named Dr. Evan Chambers. I know him from an Internet newsgroup on hobby electronics. If we can find a way to get Raph into the hospital-"

"Alright, stop it." Leo's voice changed from compassionate to aggravated. "Let me get this straight. You want us to call up a doctor that you've chatted with over the Internet, sneak Raph into a metropolitan hospital, and get him a kidney transplant?"

Don paused, turning the ridiculous idea over in his head. "In a nutshell, yes."

Leo got up. "This is insane," he muttered, walking into the kitchen.

Don followed after him. "It's our only chance," he argued.

Leo poured himself a mug of lukewarm coffee. "Don, I'd cut out my own kidney if it would help. But it won't. You don't even know this guy. You don't know if this has even the slimmest chance of working."

"It does," Don said. "I know because I went to his home and asked him. That's where I was earlier tonight."

Leo nearly dropped the mug he'd begun to lift. He stared at his brother in speechless astonishment, the blood draining from his face.

Don continued, fighting back his own anxiety. "Last week, I hacked into the Medical Association database to find his address. Just in case we needed it - as a last resort."

"What did you tell him?" Leo said weakly, in an obvious state of disbelief.

"Everything. I had to. I was asking for his help."

When Leonardo finally regained his voice after a full minute of silence, each of his separate words was a harsh articulation of affronted authority. "Do you realize the risk that-" He checked himself. He was taking on a tone that he used almost exclusively on Raphael, and it seemed too bizarre to have Donatello standing silently in front of him. He took two breaths and recomposed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I knew you wouldn't like the idea," Don said guiltily. "And I didn't want to suggest anything until I was certain we might be able to pull it off."

Leo leaned against the table unsteadily. "Okay," he said, in a way that made it clear that things were not so okay. "Now that we're in this situation…what did he say?"

"Well," Don replied, mildly relieved, "there's good news and bad news. The good news is that, it took some persuading, but he's agreed to help us, if we want to go through with this."

If Leo was surprised, he hid it. "And the bad news?"

"It'll only buy us time. Even if the operation succeeds and we all come out alive, it won't get rid of whatever poison those ninjas shot into Raph's system. With a new kidney to work off of, he'll probably last another month. But we still need an antidote."

Leo shook his head in defeat. "Then it's pointless," he said. "If Saito Doshida's dead, we have no antidote, now or later."

"If he's dead," Don emphasized. "We don't know if he is. He might be dead, he might have been captured by the Foot, or he might have gotten away." Don's eye ridges furrowed. "Without proof, we can't come to a conclusion."

"Karai's note last night sure seemed to imply a conclusion," Leo reminded him.

"Karai's note didn't tell us anything. Even if she was referring to Doshida, it didn't tell us where he is or what happened to him. And she may not have been referring to him at all. Maybe she was calling us the traitors, for turning against her by killing Moro."

"That's presuming she knew it was us, and presuming that Doshida was telling the truth about Moro being Karai's spy," Leo qualified.

"We're making more presumptions than just those," Don replied. He'd turned all the pieces around in his mind several times over the last twenty-four hours. "We're presuming that note was even written by Karai."

Leo sat down heavily. "If someone else wrote it, then someone else is in charge," he muttered, following Don's line of thought.

"Why not? The note wasn't signed. The Foot sentries said they had orders not to let us in, they never said who'd given the orders. Karai told you that she had enemies within the Clan who'd like to have an excuse to throw her from power."

"And Moro's death might have been that excuse?"

"Or a botched attempt to kill Doshida. Or hell, any other number of reasons that we don't know about."

"You think there might have been a coup."

"Or maybe what you yourself suggested to Doshida. That the Elders in Japan decided to step in to restore order."

"And perhaps they're the ones behind the attack on Doshida's office."

"There's another presumption. That there was an attack at all. As hard as it is to believe, the Foot might not have anything to do with this."

"Doshida faking his own defeat and disappearance," Leo finished for him. "Kill Moro, kill Raph, and provoke us into war with the Foot again, all in one fell swoop." Leonardo's hands closed on the edge of the table.

"Like I said. We don't know. Right now, all we can do is buy time."

Leo sighed into his now-cold mug. "Don, that might not be enough. If we go through with this crazy plan, we'd be entrusting our lives to a stranger, risking discovery, risking *everything* . And what if something goes wrong? He doesn't know how we're built. Christ, *we* don't even know how we're built on the inside."

Don pulled up a chair. "What can I tell you, Leo? I don't care much for the odds myself."

"All for one month of borrowed time that will mean nothing if Saito Doshida is dead, or fled."

Donatello was silent for a minute. "Even if he is," he said finally, "we buy Raph another month. We won't be able to say we didn't try."

"And what do we tell him? That he's got three or four weeks to live, and better yet, we risked all our lives, and gave up one of our kidneys so that he could count down the days?" Leo's expression was grim. "Would you want that, if you were him?"

Don winced. "No," he admitted. It wasn't just that he could barely imagine breaking the news to Raphael, telling him that he was helpless to prevent his own impending and futile death. It was that he could imagine the response.

"Then it's hardly fair," Leo said.

Don massaged his temples. "Then we don't tell him."

Leo's look of surprise quickly became a grimace. "Lie to him?" he shook his head. "Don, I don't know what you've been smoking today,

but these ideas are really starting to-"

"Not lie. Just… withhold information. Until we find out what's happened with this whole Foot Clan and Rising Hand business. There's still a chance we can get that antidote. But we don't have to tell him until we know for sure."

Leo finished his coffee. He was being kept awake and functioning through all these long nights by a potent mixture of caffeine, sugar, and overwhelming anxiety. Don could tell that Leo liked this whole situation less and less the more he thought about it.

"Have you told Mike or Splinter about this?" Leo asked.

"No," Don replied. He looked his brother in the eye. "I needed to talk to you first. They'll be on board if we both are."

Leonardo turned his head, his tired gaze traveling outside the kitchen to the half-open door beyond the living room, behind which Raphael lay pale and unconscious, as he had been for the past two and a half weeks. He looked back at Donatello. "How do we get in touch with this Dr. Chambers?" he asked.

"We bring Raph to ambulance docking bay number three, tomorrow night at eleven," Don said.

Leo drew back. "You've already told him we'd do it?"

Don nodded, finally sagging under the exhaustion and strain that had been at his heels all night. Without pretentiousness, "I knew what your answer would be."

Most people, Leonardo brooded, would have a hard time understanding the simplicity of deadly combat. April had once asked him how he could go into battle without hesitation, without fear, seemingly without regard for the fact that he or his siblings might be maimed or killed at any time. He'd told her that it was a result of

being trained in ninjitsu since infancy. A more profound answer, he thought now, was that for a quartet of adolescent mutants, physical danger held a kind of comforting certainty. Battle had two outcomes. Victory or defeat. Life or death. It was a straightforward formula. It was why, right now, he would rather be pitted against half a dozen fighters than doing what he was doing, which was driving up to New York Central Hospital in the back of Casey Jones's van.

It was an uncomfortably muggy night, made worse by sporadic, spitting rain. Before leaving home, Leonardo had bowed to his sensai, given April a hug, and seriously wondered if he would see either of them again. He'd had to make a lot of tough calls in his life, but this one topped the list. Mike looked visibly nervous, he kept picking at the fabric that was coming off the folding cot that they had laid Raph on. Don sat quietly, his expression impassive. God only knew what was going through his mile-a-minute mind, the same rational brain that had committed them all to the edge of this precipice.

In the twenty-minute drive, Leo had already mentally rehearsed a number of worst-case scenarios. The most dramatic one involved pulling into the hospital docking bay and being surrounded by squad cars, SWAT team members, and people in those big white suits used for outbreaks of Ebola virus. As Casey drove through the hospital parking lot, ignoring the restricted access sign and parking just to the side of the furthest ambulance docking bay, Leo peered out of the small back window, looking for any evidence that his nightmarish imaginings had been prophetic. Instead, he heard the driver's side door open and close, and after several long minutes, the back door swung open. Casey motioned urgently for them to get out. Leo hopped out the vehicle, instinctively pulling down his fedora and scrunching into his trench coat as his feet hit the damp pavement. Behind Casey was a man dressed in doctor's scrubs. Leo assessed him quickly; he was in his mid or late forties, taller than Casey, sporting a shock of reddish-brown hair and a well-trimmed beard. He had wide, keen eyes with wrinkles around them. They looked like they could be warm and inviting, but tonight they were very serious

and missed nothing. Leo tamped down the instant discomfort of having a strange human so near him, and began to say something, but Don beat him to it. "Doctor, thanks for doing this. These are the other two brothers I mentioned."

Dr. Chambers gave all of them a rapid, appraising glance. He seemed torn between fear and fascination, but was giving in to neither. "We have to hurry," he said in a businesslike tone that only partially masked his apprehension. He rolled forward a hospital gurney that he'd brought with him. "Load him onto this," he said, indicating Raphael with a gesture. He tossed a bundle to Casey. "Put these on, quickly."

It took less than a minute for the three turtles to lift Raphael onto the stretcher, and as soon as they had, Chambers covered him with one of the large black plastic sheets that normally went over corpses. Casey had thrown on doctor's scrubs and looked decidedly furtive. There was a parked ambulance shielding them from the rest of the docking bay; no one had seen them so far.

"All right now," Chambers said, sounding slightly out of breath. He wiped at the moisture on his forehead with his sleeve and pointed up to the hospital tower. "Fourth floor, third window from the left, just above the ledge, do you see it?" All three turtles nodded. "That gets you into the staff washroom. As soon as you leave the washroom, take a right and the second door on your right hand side is the operating room where we'll hopefully be in a few minutes." He exhaled tautly. "Don't get caught," he said. As if they needed reminding.

"Okay, you're coming with me." He turned to Casey and pointed to the other end of the gurney. "Grab the other end there," he instructed. "Try to look doctor-ish."

The sight of Casey Jones dressed like a surgeon might have been fantastically comical in another place and time, but right now Leo could only feel his heart beating in the back of his throat as the two humans started wheeling the stretcher towards the docking bay

entrance. Casey looked back and gave them an *"I got it under control"* wink that Leonardo found mildly reassuring, only because he knew that Casey would literally go to bat for his friends, and Raphael most of all. But the scene was eerie; two men wheeling a dead body to the morgue. Leonardo shivered inwardly.

He tore his eyes away and said, "You heard the doc."

Trench coats shed, they focused on the task ahead. The nearby ambulance was a convenient stepping-stone to the roof of the extended docking bay. The hospital tower walls were old and brick, a stroke of good fortune. They separated for a moment, assessing the best route to take, before fitting on climbing spikes. Michelangelo took the lead, hugging the wall like a rock climber and scaling it just as deftly, slowed only by the mild drizzle that made the bricks a bit slick. Don followed after a couple of minutes, and Leo stood spotting them until he saw Mike reach the fourth floor ledge and pull himself up to crouch upon it.

Mike peeked inside the building, but retreated quickly. A minute later, he rechecked, gave the all-clear signal, and examined the window frame. The lower panel could be raised from the inside to open or close the window. Mike dug out the screwdriver that Don had handed him earlier and used it to pry the panel loose from its running tracks. He gripped the ledge above him, swung out to gain momentum, and slammed heels-first into the panel, which flew inwards, Mike's body following close behind.

A minute later, Mike reappeared at the open window to help his two brothers up. They were inside. The harsh, florescent lights and antiseptic smell were a far cry from the safety of the underground. The hospital supplied few shadows and hiding places. It was no place for a ninja, especially not mutant ones.

Leonardo took a quick look into the hallway. No one. Quiet. It was late at night. Mike had astutely written "Out of Order" on a paper towel and stuck it to the washroom door. It was a three, maybe four-second dash to get to the room that Chambers had indicated. But it

wouldn't be darting through shadow; this was a hospital corridor. The realization of exactly where he was and how deep a mess they were in was mind-bending. Leo swallowed a surreal fear that he could recall having experienced very few times in his life. Then he moved.

He didn't hear any cries of discovery or alarm; no one rounded the corner at that most inopportune moment. He slipped through the double doors of the operating room, and nearly shook with relief to see Casey and the doctor there. He signaled to Mike and Don and they were in the room within seconds. Dr. Chambers took one last look outside, then shut the doors and locked them. Only then did he pull the morgue sheet off Raphael, looking at him with surgical fascination. The three turtles and Casey watched in anxious silence as the man looked Raph up and down critically, examining how the plastron fused with tissue and shell. "Unbelievable," they heard him mutter. And then with less enthusiasm, "This is not going to be easy."

"Can you do it?" Mike asked, worried.

The doctor looked up, mildly startled, despite everything, to hear Michelangelo speak. "We'll see," he said. After a moment of study, he picked Don out of the group and told him to take a seat on a nearby chair so he could draw a blood sample for a compatibility test. Don complied silently, and Leo watched uneasily as a clear syringe filled with his sibling's blood. In much the same way he was sitting now, Donatello had just as stoically insisted that he be the one to go under the knife, and had refused to entertain either of his brothers' protests. Leo understood, even if he didn't agree; this was Don's idea, and he would accordingly bear the greatest risk. Mild-mannered Donatello could be stubborn as any of them, when it came down to it, Leo thought.

Leo didn't dwell on it. He was in an extraordinarily unusual situation and had to deal with it as best he could. He called for Casey to give him a hand and went to work propping a table against the door to make sure it kept shut. He tied his rappelling hook and wire to the handle so that the metal hooks would tinkle against the steel table if anyone jiggled the door. He hoisted Mike up and had him loosen a

couple of the air vent grills in the ceiling in case they needed to make an emergency exit. He refused to think about how such an exit would almost certainly entail leaving Raph and Don lying cut open on the operating table. After he'd secured the room as best he could, he turned back to where Don was helping the doctor set up an I.V. tube.

Even in the cool, humidity-controlled room, Dr. Chambers had a thin film of sweat on his forehead. Leo watched him muttering to himself, occasionally asking Don questions about their mutant anatomy. What was their normal body temperature? Same number of ribs as a human? The man was nervous, and with a surge of guilt, Leo realized that the doctor's position was just as precarious as theirs, if not more so. No matter what Don might have said by way of explanation or reassurance, surely the man was still wondering. For all he knew, the four of them were aliens, or military secrets, and what followed for him might be arrest or abduction or worse.

Leo said to him, "You're a good man, doctor. We can't repay you, but please believe that we won't harm you."

Chambers looked up, his face a pale yellow in the stark light. His demeanor seemed to ease a little and he replied finally, "I believe you. But you realize what you're asking for. I can't guarantee anything."

"I know," Leo said. "We'll try to help. We'll do whatever you ask us to. But try your best."

"Don, are you awake?"

At the border of consciousness, the sudden recollection of everything that had happened yanked him from his pleasant stupor like a fish jerked on a hook. He forced his eyes open and gasped involuntarily. At first he thought there was something wrong with his vision, then he realized it was just that the lights were dim, and that the florescent glare of the hospital had been traded for the subdued

murkiness of his underground bedroom. "Master?" he croaked at the nearest bedside figure.

Splinter smiled and his eyes, which always gleamed in the dark, glistened with relief. "Donatello," he said, with warmth, "you've been so very brave."

Don turned frantic, questioning eyes on Leonardo.

"You're fine," Leo reassured him. "Raph's fine. Mike's with him, but he's still asleep. We got both of you out okay." He permitted his own relief to show through in a small smile. "You did it, Don."

"Are you sure?" He couldn't help but be skeptical.

"We were still worried since we obviously couldn't keep you in the hospital to get better. We'll see if Raph wakes up in the next couple of days."

"And the doctor?"

"Also fine. We can trust him - he won't tell."

Don seemed satisfied at last, or else his fatigue was starting to overcome him. He leaned back and closed his eyes. Leo didn't trouble him with any more details. There'd be time later to recount those harrowing hours, to mention the care he and Mike had taken to make sure that no samples of their blood or tissue were left behind in the hospital, and to explain how Saito Doshida had helped them after all, in a fashion. Or rather, how the vial of amnesiac that he had been so proud to show off, and that Leo had palmed after finding it lying in the ransacked office, had truly ensured that the good doctor could be trusted. He wondered if Don would be surprised. But then again, they'd all managed to surprise themselves lately.

Still, they had no time to waste. Leonardo and Michelangelo hit the streets the following night, searching for anything that might help

them piece together what had happened to Doshida. Days passed and they found nothing. The office had been abandoned and put up for rent again. The streets seemed devoid of ninja activity. The Rising Hand, if it still existed, had gone so far underground as to be invisible even to ninja eyes.

The night that Raphael awoke, there was a shared sense of relief, a splash of hopeful color on a canvas painted in the grays of worry, guilt, and pervading urgency. Mike watched Raph's eyes struggle open and had to resist the urge to give his brother a grateful hug and spill the whole awful story of the last three weeks. But he didn't. Instead, as soon as Raph was settled asleep again, he and Leo ascended to the city above.

This time, they found something. Or rather, someone. A man, too young and fit to be ordinary street trash, lying sprawled in the corner of an alleyway. They would have passed him by, if the headlights of a passing truck hadn't for a second swept across his frozen features, the eyes wide and staring, even though the blood-encrusted chin had dropped down to rest against his chest.

His neck was broken, they saw upon closer inspection. This in itself was unusual. Violent death on the street was typically delivered with bullets or knives. It takes skill to beat a man senseless and break his neck. Mike turned away from the empty eyes in distaste, just as Leo called, "Mike, take a look at this." Streaked spots of blood on the sidewalk, like short angry slashes. Some wounded individual had left this place in a hurry.

They followed the trail until it led into a park, at which point it became much harder to track the blood and footprints through dark, well-worn grass. Then at the edge of a wooded ravine, it ended altogether, probably because the victim had finally had the good sense to tie the wound. Mike scuffed the soil in frustration. To have come all this way for nothing… it was very late at night and this part of the park was very dark. They could scour these trees for hours. Leo looked just as dejected at having lost their first real lead.

Out of sheer luck, Mike glanced across to the other side of the embankment and saw movement. He could barely make it out, but someone was rapidly picking his way up the other side of the ravine towards the freeway.

Leo followed his gaze and spotted it too. Then they were sprinting down into the gully, through the trees so quickly it was a wonder neither one of them lost his footing and went sprawling over the bumpy terrain. They were still maybe thirty yards from their target when the figure turned, saw two dark shapes hurtling towards him, and scrambled up the rest of the slope with a burst of desperate speed.

The man was fast, but wounded and tired. Mike was faster. He was closer than Leo was, and caught the man at the lip of the ravine. At the last second, his quarry threw a number of frantic punches, but Mike grabbed the wrist, twisted it, and threw the person flat on his back against the ground. The figure gave a high-pitched cry, and Mike realized that it was not a man at all, but a woman.

Leo was there a second later, his katana drawn. A brief flicker of surprise crossed his face at the sight of the lady ninja lying in the dirt, clasping her wounded arm to her side. Her face was a pale portrait of horror and hatred as she struggled to sit up. Leo held the edge of his katana a foot in front of her, barring her from rising. "What clan are you from?" he demanded. She hesitated, and he said roughly, "Tell the truth. Neither answer is better than the other at this point."

She looked up at them defiantly. "Rising Hand."

The two turtles exchanged glances. "Where's your leader?" Mike demanded. "Where's Doshida?"

Her face seemed to be waging a war of emotions. "Gone," she replied sharply, and Mike felt a dizzying wash of dread at her next words. "Dead, by now. The Foot got him." Her breath became ragged with anger.

"The dead man in the alley?" Leo probed, his voice wooden.

Her delicate composure cracked like porcelain. "Hiro," she wailed, her eyes tight to block out tears. "They killed him. The Foot will kill all of us, for our treachery."

"Who's in charge now?" Leo continued.

"Hiro was. Now there is no one."

"You're sure Doshida's dead?" Mike couldn't help pressing.

She made a noise like a muffled sob in her throat, and glared up at them with loathing. "You pathetic freaks," she spat. "Even if he wasn't, even if my clan wasn't being killed off left and right, you think I'd ever say anything to help you?" She shivered on the cold ground, but seemed to radiate waves of reckless fury. "I know why you're trying to find him, I know about your brother." Her voice rose. "I was the one who shot him with the poison dart."

It was as though the temperature abruptly dropped ten degrees. Mike saw the edge of the katana blade quiver in Leo's always-steady hands.

The wounded Rising Hand soldier saw it too. She lifted her chin fearlessly and said, "If I had the antidote, I would never give it to you. There isn't a ninja in the city that wouldn't be happy to see him dead. Go ahead, kill me. There's nothing better waiting for me now."

The pride in her voice made Mike sick. He saw, in her savage eyes, the reflection of all the hatefulness he'd seen in every ninja he'd ever fought. Foot, or Rising Hand, it made no difference. They'd be equally pleased to see him and those he loved in pain. He imagined this lady ninja's unabashed and triumphant glee, atop some sniper perch, that evening nearly a month ago. *If it wasn't for her…* Without realizing it, he was stepping forward, his nunchuku in hand.

"Mike," Leo said sharply, putting a hand out to halt him. Mike met his brother's sympathetic yet stern glare. Leo put the flat of his sword under the woman's chin and studying the face, said, "You're related to him, aren't you?"

Mike blinked, then realized what Leonardo meant. The ninja's face bore a mild but unmistakable resemblance to Doshida's. A sister, or cousin perhaps. Her lips tightened to a straight line but trembled as they did so. Ruthless ninja or not, this time when Mike looked at her, he saw a wounded, unarmed woman, dirty and hounded, the dignity of her dying clan the only bulwark against despair.

Leo lowered his katana and sheathed it. "If what you've said is true," he said with neither a hint of compassion nor malice, "then the rest of your short life will be punishment enough."

They left her there. The walk home was long and silent.

In the following two weeks, Don recovered rapidly, Raphael regained his strength, and life returned to normal. Or rather, there was a semblance of normality. It was difficult, knowing that Raph's recovery was illusory. Harder yet, to keep that fact from him. They had agreed not to let Raphael know what had happened until they knew whether getting the antidote was still a possibility. Now that all evidence seemed to suggest it wasn't, the secret was still easier to keep than to divulge. Several times, Mike came close to telling him. Raphael deserved to know. Yet every time, he would look at his brother and ache with fear. He could not imagine Raphael consenting to peacefully awaiting death. He had a terrible hunch about what Raph might do if they told him the truth. Every remaining day they had with him, healthy and content, was too valuable, even if they got it only because they lied.

Mike knew the others felt the same way, even Splinter, to whom they'd never told the whole story about the encounter with the lady ninja in the park. Maybe they still held out the hope that something would happen, some new piece of information would surface to give

them hope that everything they'd been through thus far hadn't been in vain.

Something did happen, although it was hard to say what it meant. One night, Don returned from fixing April's stereo, and reported that he'd seen numerous Foot ninja out on the streets. For whatever reason, the Foot had decided to make a sudden and forceful reappearance.

They didn't get the chance to pursue this new development. Raphael picked the next night to sneak out alone. When he returned the next morning, they knew he'd found out.

"So that's it?" Raph asked.

Leo nodded. He'd wondered what Raphael's reaction would be, and now strangely enough, there didn't seem to be much of one. For someone so notoriously temperamental, who'd just flung a chair across the kitchen and raged at the lot of them, Raph seemed to be at a curious lack for words.

"We should have told you earlier," Don said.

Raph didn't answer. A number of emotions seemed to be battling for control of his face; anger, astonishment, but above all, a look of fierce thoughtfulness. When he opened his mouth to speak, Leo wasn't sure whether to expect calm, controlled words, or to brace himself for an outburst of apoplectic rage.

It was somewhere in middle ground. "So what's the verdict?" Raph demanded. "What've I got? A couple weeks?"

The conversation he'd been dreading. Before he could say anything, Leo heard Splinter answer.

"Do not speak with such finality yet, Raphael," the sensai said, in a tone that Leo realized the old master was using more to comfort

himself than anyone else. "I've told you all many times never to anticipate the outcome of any battle, and this is no different."

Raphael shook his head, frowning. "All this time you didn't tell me." His words were accusing and laced with bared hostility. "You didn't think I could handle it."

"That's not true," Mike protested. But Raph got up, turned his back on them, and stalked out of the room.

Once he was out of earshot, Leo cast a quick glance at his other brothers. "Keep an eye on him," he said in a low voice.

Despite Leonardo's instructions, Raph gave them all the slip and disappeared the next evening. He must have been watching and waiting for them all to turn their backs for one second, which proved to be all the time he needed to sneak out. It was obvious he didn't want anyone to know when and where he was going.

"Goddammit," Leo had cursed vehemently under his breath after phoning Casey's without luck. Before they could phone April, she phoned them. She hadn't seen Raph or heard anything from him, but she did have something else to tell them. She sounded worried and just a little frightened. A note had been delivered to them, slipped under April's door.

"There's something fishy about this whole thing," Don said.

It was quiet here. Obscenely quiet compared to downtown Manhattan. They were in an industrial part of town, and this late at night, the massive shapes of buildings and equipment looked like the ruins of some ancient and brutish civilization. Where they stood, in the shadow of a semi-trailer parked just off to the side of a large packing plant, the air still stank of propane exhaust and sulphur.

Leo's hair-trigger senses scanned the area for the umpteenth time. Nothing out of the ordinary. Not a sound. No sign of movement. If this was some sort of ambush, it was a very, very good one. "She's late," he said uneasily.

No sooner had the words been spoken than he heard the distant sound of tires rolling slowly on gravel. It grew louder, and a couple seconds later, a black sedan pulled up and parked on the side of the road. Reflexively, all three of them drew further into the darkness, avoiding the bright headlights.

A lone figure, in a long coat and shawl, emerged from the car and strode towards them. Leo waited until he was certain who it was, then stepped forward to meet her.

She stopped and her hard gaze traveled over the three figures before her. She was noting the lack of a fourth turtle. Leo wondered what her interpretation of that fact would be. It was as much a mystery to them as it was to her; despite the efforts of the previous day, they'd found no sign of Raphael.

"You are alone?" she asked.

Leo nodded curtly and brandished a square of paper in front of her. "What is this?" he accused.

She didn't look at the note that had appeared in April O'Neil's apartment, and that was now being held before her face. "It was the fastest way to reach you," she explained.

"You keep April out of this," Mike warned.

Karai pushed back the hood of her coat. The nighttime glow of the city, muted here in the industrial park, cast her well-shaped face into the likeness of a Japanese theatre mask. "The matter is urgent," she replied. "It concerns Saito Doshida."

"Doshida," Leo said, "was captured and killed by the Foot. Under your instructions." There was no mistaking the dangerous sentiment in his voice.

"Captured, yes. Not killed." She grimaced. "For his gross treason, he was to be brought before the Council of Elders. Apparently, his rebellious ideas had reached even their ears. He was imprisoned, to await trial."

"So he's still alive?" They all shared Don's surprise.

"Unfortunately, he has escaped. He drugged his guards, I don't know how. He is at large."

That explains all the Foot on the streets, Leo thought. *One twist after another.* "Why have you come to us?"

"My Foot soldiers may be diligent, but no one knows the secret places of the city as well as you do. I am asking you to aid the Foot in finding and recapturing him."

A startled hush. When they'd come here tonight, this was not what they had expected. "Help the Foot," Mike scoffed. "What makes you think we would do that?"

"The Council has given me an ultimatum." She lowered her eyes in shame. "My position in the Foot depends on recovering Doshida, preferably alive but not necessarily so, and bringing him before the Council before the end of the week." She raised her gaze to look squarely at them, but left unspoken the obvious continuation: *Your peace with the Foot is due to me. You have a vested interest in keeping me in power.*

Leo shifted as uncomfortably as if she had said the words aloud. Karai waited a moment, then said, "Even if that does not move you, think of this as your chance to make a lasting peace with the Foot Council. You can demonstrate your goodwill by apprehending a sworn enemy of the Clan. There are those in the upper-echelon of

the Foot that hate Doshida as much, if not more, than they hate you."

"Great," Don muttered.

"But all that may be a minor consideration." Her tone feigned flippancy, even as her piercing eyes narrowed to slits. "You realize this is your only chance for retribution against your brother's killer. Surely your sense of honor has already made the decision for you."

The line of Leo's jaw tensed, evidence that her blatant challenge had affected him. Did she presume that Raphael was already dead, he wondered, or had she somehow discovered it to be otherwise? What did it matter? He hardly knew what to think now. They were caught in this deadly chess game between the Foot and the Rising Hand, and he had no illusions that both sides were trying to play him and his brothers to their advantage. He felt like a minnow, caught in a vicious net. *Karai let us lead her to Doshida. Doshida used us to murder Moro. Now Karai would convince us to kill Doshida.* Things were spinning out of control. Not for the first time, he wished that he could retreat somewhere and simply let the two Clans destroy each other. But he couldn't. There was a third clan, his own, hanging in the balance.

Instead of responding to her provocation, he reminded her harshly, "That retribution you speak of could just as readily fall on you. We might have gotten the antidote if you hadn't so conveniently decided to interfere."

To his surprise, she smiled faintly. "And I might just as easily blame you for Moro Osaka's death." She said it so simply that it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. "But I won't," she continued. "Because I know that Doshida engineered it. And for more reasons than he would have told you." The mask that was her face seemed to hold an expression of bemused pity. "Did he happen to tell you how Osaka received that scar on his face?"

"In battle," Leo replied, wondering where this was leading. "With Raphael."

"Did he mention which battle?"

"No. What are you getting at?"

Karai sighed, as if saddened by what she had to say next. "Osaka was not an ordinary Foot soldier. He was one of Oruku Saki's Enforcers." She saw the blank looks on their faces and explained, "Normally, ninja clans have little need for such people. For hundreds of years, the codes of ninja honor and discipline passed from generation to generation have ensured that open insubordination to the will of the clan was a rare occurrence. But, as you know, Oruku Saki grew the New York Foot very quickly, and to do so, he recruited outside of normal ninja circles. He brought in youngsters with an aptitude for ninjitsu but without ninja blood or upbringing. So sometimes the rules of the Clan were flouted. Hence the need for a special internal guard to maintain discipline. Moro was one of that guard."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Mike asked.

"Doshida, the traitor, took his wild and modern ideals and deserted the Clan, back when Oruku Saki was still leader. Saki sent an Enforcer squad, led by Osaka, to punish him."

"To kill him," Don supplied.

"That was the punishment for treason. It would have been carried out, had your brother, Raphael, not intervened."

There was a stupefied silence.

Karai elaborated, "He saw a single man, pursued, and then cornered by Foot Soldiers. This was the time of Oruku Saki; your brother needed little excuse to kill any Foot he set eyes on. Osaka, though wounded, was the only one of his four-man squad to escape.

"Saki was furious. It was bad enough that Osaka had lost all his men in battle against one of the hated mutants. Too add to that, he had failed to carry out his mission to dispense justice to Doshida, and that was very bad, because Doshida wasn't just a traitor, he was a pure blood ninja, from an old ninja family, and his desertion at a time when the Foot most needed him was unforgivable. Saki needed to make an example of Doshida, and failed to do so. Osaka was stripped of his rank, and demoted to the lowest echelon of the Foot, nearly tantamount to exile."

Leonardo wasn't sure where Karai was leading, but standing in the gloom, listening to the Foot leader's even, icy voice reminisce about the Turtles' old mortal enemy, he fought back a shudder.

"Eight months ago, I made Osaka an offer," Karai said. "Pretend to desert the Clan, join one of the splinter factions and do everything in his power to orchestrate Doshida's downfall, thereby finally fulfilling the mission he'd been given years before. If successful, he would return to the Foot, his shame erased, his former rights and rank restored."

"So Osaka was your spy," Don finished.

"Yes, he was a Foot agent. He did everything right. He stalled and opposed Doshida, and he believed he had the man ensnared so that he could not strike back without compromising his own position. But he did not anticipate that Doshida would find a way around the predicament by using you."

Leonardo's eyes blazed angrily at her words. "It was the only chance to get the antidote you couldn't or wouldn't give us."

"I suppose that's what he told you," she conceded. "Even I failed to foresee the resourcefulness of the man." A hint of bitter admiration in her voice. "He found an ingenious way, without doing battle and without incriminating himself, to eliminate the two individuals he most despised. Osaka, the man who once nearly killed him, and who was now his greatest obstacle. And your brother, Raphael."

Coolly, she regarded their mortified, angry faces. Mike shook his head incredulously. "Raph saved Doshida's life."

"That was the problem. Your brother probably didn't know he was saving a Foot traitor, that he was interfering with ninja justice. But for Doshida, the situation was disgraceful. He had been, until recently, a member of the Foot family. He had seen friends die at your hands. Though he broke away from the Foot, he hated you all the same. And to owe his life to one of you, why, that was the worst dishonor. Death would be preferable. Can you imagine, the self-styled visionary and leader of the next generation of ninjas, forever living with the knowledge that he was in debt to one of his mutant enemies? Who would ever follow such a man? No, Raphael was his shameful secret. He couldn't be happier to see him buried.

"So you see, Doshida never had any intention of giving you the antidote. It was all part of his scheme. You just didn't know it."

"Raphael knew it." Leo's voice, when it finally broke the awful quiet that followed Karai's words, did not sound like his own. It sounded like the voice of defeat, of all the hurt and worry and sacrifice of the last five weeks, gathered together and reflecting back on its own futility. "That's where he's gone. To kill Doshida, before he dies himself."

Part Four: Repercussions

Terms of Allegiance

Part Four: Repercussions

By foot, it was quite a long journey to his destination. He'd considered asking Casey for a ride in his van, but had quickly decided against the idea. The last thing he needed now was to get someone else involved. Even Casey would be a liability tonight.

He'd left the evening before, after several hours of thinking that he'd never get the chance. When he'd finally snuck away, he'd traveled at a brisk jog that he would normally be able to keep up for hours on end. Three times he was forced to stop and rest. A couple of nights ago, he would have attributed this fact to being unusually fatigued from training, or something of that nature. Now that he knew better, he tried not to dwell on it.

He'd traveled until dawn, then found a decently dry storm drain to rest in during the day. Plenty of time, in between light snoozes, to think about his situation. He presumed that his brothers would not be particularly happy about what he'd done, but telling them would have required too much explaining and he didn't have time to make them understand. Right now, he was having a hard enough time fathoming how strange his reality had suddenly become. He was sitting in a storm drain on the other side of town, knowing he had less than two weeks to live. He had one of Don's kidneys, for Christ's sake. Too damn weird. He'd always assumed he'd die in battle. Well, maybe he would still get his chance.

He reached his target early that evening and spent an hour scouting around it. It was discreetly but forcefully guarded. There were a number of idle-looking young men hanging around sipping Slurpees. They could easily pass as common loitering youths, except that Raphael watched them for some time and noticed how alertly and

seriously they glanced around themselves, often pacing the perimeter. He counted five of them all together, one always at the front door, and two pairs that made routine circuits.

He was looking at an old boathouse that was unremarkable from the outside save for the fact that it was so sadly unkempt. What made the place interesting was not the structure itself, but the underground passage that led to a sizable secret storeroom. It dated back to Prohibition-era days and had once seen some significant usage by the New York mafia. It had fallen into disuse, and nowadays, it made a pretty good refuge for someone that didn't want to be found. Raphael knew all this because he'd been here before. He also knew that if Saito Doshida were alive and at large, he would come here.

No need to waste any more time. The direct approach was always best.

He left his vantage point and snuck as close as he could to the boathouse. What made the building such a worthy hiding spot was how difficult it was to approach unnoticed. It stood alone, offering a clear view across the harbor, with the pier on one side and a long empty pedestrian walkway on the other. Raphael got close enough that he had three men in sight. Two were standing off to his right. Raph reached into a pouch on his belt and extracted a couple of tiny spheres each no larger than a marble. He used these sparingly because it was hard for him and his brothers to acquire them, but they'd be worth it tonight. He flung the balls, and a second later heard two soft pops. There were two concurrent bursts of piercing bright light and a startled yell from the sentries as they reeled back, blinded.

It was all the distraction Raphael needed. He'd nearly reached the front door before the guard in front of it, craning his neck to see what had happened to his cohorts, realized Raph was coming straight at him. He drew a gun from his jacket, took a second too long taking off the safety, and managed to make one desperately wide shot before the turtle's sai, held in a reserve grip in his left hand, pierced the man's forearm. The nerveless fingers spasmed, the gun clattered to

the ground. The fighter leveraged his weight forward, expecting to counter the force of his attacker barreling into him. Instead, Raph swerved at the last moment, pivoting around the man, sweeping back with a leg that slammed into his opponent's calves. The man pitched forward, his throat connecting with Raph's waiting knife hand strike.

The key was speed. The other sentries would be here in a second, and, as he'd just had a chance to witness, these ninjas didn't necessarily have an aversion to using firearms. He hefted the slumped body of the man he'd just disabled and flung him into the door. The wood splintered inward and by the time the guard inside the boathouse realized that the flying figure was one of his colleagues, Raphael had somersaulted inside and landed in a fighting crouch.

The ninja who met him now was good. Very good, in fact. Raphael was forced back under the sudden flurry of short, rapid hand and elbow strikes. A couple of them got through his defenses, though luckily they were both blows to the sternum that were largely absorbed by his plastron. A human would have keeled over, but Raph merely hissed inaudibly at the pain, used his opponent's split second of surprise, and threw three lightening quick blows. The first, a feint to the chin, then two powerful jabs to the solar plexus. The ninja doubled over, and Raph hopped up, sending a knee to the man's face.

Instead of letting his opponent fall, Raphael wheeled him around, and held him in front like a shield as the four remaining guards burst into the small confines of the boathouse. Raph backed up against a rack of dusty fishing nets and tackle. His eyes swept across the men he was facing, and as they began to move, he shouted, "Wait!" For a moment, they paused, startled, and Raph said loudly, "You want to live, don't you?" He pointed to a walkie-talkie that one of them had on his belt. "Tell your boss who's here. Tell him I'm coming down." His voice sounded fierce and convincing, much to his relief. Behind

the unresponsive guard that he was using as a human shield, he was fighting to keep his chest from heaving with exertion.

The four men glanced at each other and stared at him. He recognized two of them. They were the among the Rising Hand ninja that he'd encountered a few nights ago. Why did it seem so much longer ago than that? It was the memory of that run-in that had convinced him that Doshida was alive and somewhere in the city. He locked gazes with the hesitating ninja. "Better hurry it up," he growled.

The man with the walkie-talkie fidgeted, then picked it up and spoke quietly into it. "Doshida-san, forgive me, there's one of those… turtles here. The one with the sais." Not in Japanese, Raph noted. "He's taken out James and Aki. Says he's coming down." A static whine, then silence. Then something being said on the other end that Raph couldn't make out. Finally, the guard looked up rigidly and said, "He says okay. As long as you don't make any more trouble." The ninja's gaze flicked to the two men Raph had disabled and his tone became angry. "They better be-"

"They're fine," Raph said. Well, mostly fine. He lowered the man whose nose he'd broken, setting him against the wall with a show of exaggerated regard. Taking slow, deliberate steps, he moved to the trapdoor in the back of the boathouse, never letting his eyes stray from the men who watched him with unrelenting suspicion. He knelt, felt for the hidden handle he knew was there, and lifted it. Before anyone could make another move, he dropped into the opening and let the doorway fall into place behind him.

He was on a set of stone steps. It was dark and cool and he crouched on the stairs where he'd landed, letting his eyes adjust. He'd just yielded Doshida the advantage and he hadn't intended on doing that. The truth was, he wasn't sure he could have quickly taken out all four ninja, especially if they had firearms. Even now, he waited, regaining his strength. He was not used to this sensation of weakness and he hated it.

After a moment, he made his way down the short stone corridor. The dim, narrow confines reminded him of countless sewer tunnels that he'd seen in his life. He passed another guard that glared at him tensely but did not move to stop him. Raphael reached a lopsided wooden door and opened it. He faced the silhouette of man standing calmly in the center of the room.

"Saito, you sorry sack of shit," Raphael seethed. "I should have killed you long ago."

Doshida gave an amused snort. The dim light accentuated how gaunt his shapely face had become. There was a purpling bruise around his right eye, and he moved gingerly. The Foot had not treated him well. But his gaze was still as wickedly keen as a coyote's. "Raphael," he said pleasantly. "Still alive, I see."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Is this how you always greet old friends?"

"You're not my friend."

"You're being unfair. You make it sound like you had nothing to do with all this."

Raphael bristled. "You asshole. You dragged my brothers into this. You tried to kill me, you ungrateful prick."

Doshida shook his head. "I didn't. My cousin, Korin, hates you, has hated you since her boyfriend died years ago." He spread his hands in a gesture of indulgent regret. "The Shredder might share equal blame for the bloodshed of past years, but that doesn't make people such as Kory like you any better."

In the space of a heartbeat, Raphael closed the distance between them, the prongs of his sai forming the shadowy shape of steel claws extending from his hand. "Don't play innocent," he snapped. "It's *your* fucking poison in my blood, ain't it?"

"True enough," Doshida conceded, not flinching away from the angry reptile less than a couple of feet away from him. "I came to an understanding with your brothers - we'd trade one favor for another."

"Bullshit. This was all your little game." His voice would have made large men cower. "By all rights, I'm supposed to be dead by now."

"That makes two of us." Doshida's thin lips curved into a smile. "I'm pleased to see your comrades were able to find a way to keep you alive while I was...unfortunately detained." He arched an eyebrow at the contemptuous skepticism in Raphael's expression. "If you don't believe me, why are you here? You didn't come here to kill me."

"Don't be so sure." Raphael's teeth showed in a snarl. He could move fast enough that neither Saito nor his guards would have a chance to react.

"You told me once before, you weren't about to do the Foot any favors. I don't think you will now." Doshida turned slowly and sat on the arm of an old futon frame. The room looked like it had been thrown together with garage sale items. In addition to the futon, there was a scarred desk, a cooler with a wash basin sitting on top of it, and a folding chair. "Raphael, where I be without you? If I wasn't so cynical, I'd say that fate had a hand in all this."

"Fate, my ass. I took a chance on you. I should've let you run off to Mexico, or wherever it was you were going to go."

Doshida refused to be goaded by the turtle's ire. "It was good thing you convinced me otherwise. You helped me see that I was right." Saito's sunken features radiated a remorseless self-satisfaction. "I told you that the old ways were becoming defunct, that the next generation of ninja would be different. If that isn't true, how would I be standing here now?"

Raph looked at the man in front of him, and his mind flashed to the memory of a younger, less secure Saito Doshida, standing in this very room three years ago. "We had a deal." He made a motion

meant to encompass not just the sorry environs, but the whole insane situation. "This wasn't part of it."

"Look at how far we've come." Saito's gaze was piercing. "You must have thought of me as your reserve, a roundabout shot at revenge, even if you and your family died at Saki's hands." He paused, daring the turtle to challenge the veracity of what he'd said. "Well, you survived after all that, and now you're close to seeing your wish come true."

"You call this close? You got yourself captured. There's Foot everywhere. They're going to find you and shish kebab you." Not such a bad idea, he reflected. Then there was his own role in this. "If Karai finds out the truth-"

"Karai won't find out. It would be incomprehensible to her that we'd be cooperating in any way. From her honor-bound point-of-view, I'm a disgrace not to have slit my belly after finding myself in your debt, much less be talking to you." He shrugged. "Honor is such a subjective term. I'm going to survive. She's not."

"You're pretty damn cocky," Raph said. "They have more ninjas than you do. It's a matter of time before they find this place."

"I know. I'm counting on it." Doshida gave him a pleased, conspiratorial look. "The walls of this tunnel are rigged with dynamite." For the first time, he indicated what looked like a small array of wiring and electrical gadgets on his desk. "Once the heat sensor is activated, anyone who gets down here won't be coming out again." For a second, his usual poise faltered and a look of hideous vindictiveness crossed his face. "It's time to strike a decisive blow against the Foot."

With his attention on Doshida, Raphael sensed the approach later than he normally would have. Still, before any obvious sound or movement reached him, he whirled, sais in hand. A young woman was coming down the corridor, one arm bandaged. She came to a dead halt just outside the doorway, her eyes fixed on Raphael in

horrified disbelief, her features hardening sharply with undisguised hostility.

"Hello Kory," Doshida said.

"What," she articulated in a voice that sounded like frost spreading on glass, "is that *thing* doing here?"

So this was Korin. Raphael felt his wrath flaring into the physical sensation of heat spreading up his neck and face. It took a tremendous amount of will power not to skewer her where she stood. If she'd been armed, or if she'd been a man, it would have been different.

Doshida cut in, "He is my guest." His tone was casual but his expression stern. "He's aiding us against the Foot."

Raph shot the man a brief, vicious glance at the generous exaggeration.

Korin turned to her cousin in utter disgust. For a second, Raphael wondered if she was crazy enough to challenge her own clan leader with an enemy just a few feet away. Perhaps she considered the same thing. She wheeled and retreated quickly back the way she'd come.

Doshida made a nonchalant noise and picked up his jacket from the back of his chair. "If it's not one thing, it's another," he commented, shrugging it on.

Raphael's sai, which had never relaxed, flashed up to block Saito's way. "Where do you think your going?"

Doshida looked at him in mild irritation. "To get what you came for, of course. The antidote to Blackroot poison."

Raphael hesitated. "Where is it?"

"In a safety deposit box. In a bank." He chuckled at the turtle's nonplussed expression. "I have a number of products that are worth considerable sums of money. You think I carry them in my back pocket?" He took out a small pad of memo paper and a pen from his inside pocket and wrote down an address. "Here," he said, handing Raphael the note. "Do you know where this is?"

Raph's eyes flicked down to the neat writing. "Yeah," he said. "So?"

"The bank doesn't open for another few hours. You can hide out for the day, you can go home, stay here, follow me, I don't care. But meet me tomorrow evening at nine o'clock at this address and I'll give you what you want." He smiled craftily. "And something else. A surprise. I wouldn't miss it if I were you."

He had a number of secret caches around the city. He'd set them up because he knew that they might prove useful to someone who more than occasionally found himself unable or unwilling to return home quickly. He went to one of them just before dawn. Along an abandoned stretch of old subway line, he paced carefully until he found the mark he'd left much earlier. He pushed back a loose slab of concrete and took out a plastic bag, inside of which was a trench coat and hat. Rolled inside the balled garments was a wad of cash, some coins, and a few ninja essentials; shuriken, a couple smoke bombs, a slim versatile blade. He replaced the items he didn't need in the hiding place, pulled on the trench coat and hat, and pocketed the coins.

Up on the street, with the remains of the night seeping away, he phoned home and got no response.

Back underground, he found a dry spot and sat brooding. He was unreasonably sore and fatigued. He didn't know what to expect anymore. He wondered, not for the first time, if he should have taken the opportunity to kill Doshida, either last night, or earlier. In broad daylight there was no way to follow him all day, and letting the man out of his sight might well mean never seeing him again. But he'd

done it, he'd taken the last chance he had in life and gambled on the word of the ruthlessly self-serving Saito, who, he had to admit, had kept his word in respect to another promise he'd made to Raphael years ago: *"I will do all I can to see the ruin of the Foot Clan."*

Against his will, he dozed. He woke in the late afternoon and climbed up to the street to orient himself. He was not overly familiar with this area of town and he had to think carefully about which sewer tunnels would take him to his destination. He set off a little slower than he usually would. He'd been moving a lot over the last forty-eight hours and his protesting body reminded him that he was on borrowed time.

The address that Doshida had given him belonged to a trendy noodle house situated on a road that wound up the crest of a hill. Standing in front of the restaurant, hands stuffed in pockets, listening to the sound of clinking dishes and the hubbub of noise emanating from inside, he felt far too conspicuous. Saito was not here, but there were too many people on the sidewalk. He crossed the road to where metered parking spots bordered a railing that fenced off the slope of the hill. Hidden behind the cars, Raphael stood against the metal fence, looking out across the river to the buildings on the other side. The warehouse of a shipping company and a couple of high-rise condominium buildings. Just further in, an appliance store, a car dealership, and a building officially registered with the city as the New York School of Japanese Martial Arts. The Foot compound. It was hard to tell from a distance, but it looked quiet. Most of the members were probably out right now, looking for the same man that Raphael was waiting for.

The night felt peaceful, but Raphael did not. He took in the view for only a couple moments before turning his attention to watching both sides of the street. He hadn't ruled out the possibility of some kind of set-up, though for what he could only speculate. Heaven knew Doshida had had enough chances to try to kill him, and could succeed in doing so tonight simply by not showing up. Raphael's small reserves of patience ground down with the passing minutes.

When Doshida finally did appear, it was by stepping casually out of the noodle house with a brisk look around. Raphael moved into the man's line of sight and Saito, after a moment of careful scrutiny, crossed the road to meet him.

"Surprised to see me?" the man asked facetiously. From his inside pocket Doshida procured three glass vials filled with slightly milky liquid. He handed them to Raphael, who studied them suspiciously. They had small white labels with some numeric code and in small print: *Blackroot counteractant. 3 doses one week apart.* The corresponding Japanese characters were written beneath.

"Don't look so doubtful," Doshida said. "I had a bargain with your brothers. I've kept my half of it."

"This is it?" Raphael was dubious.

"What have I to gain from tricking you? There's no advantage in having your family as my enemies." He grinned. His bruised eye looked ghoulish in the reflected streetlight. "At least, not right now."

With this afterthought, his face was as honest it could ever get. Raphael saw it for what it was- the face of a man that operated not on principle, but on the constant weighing of risk and return. No sense of honor, no scruples, just a predisposition to achieve profitable ends by vicious means. Not a new generation of ninja, Raphael realized. A throwback to the earliest kind.

Doshida stepped into the street and hailed a cab. Before it pulled up, he said, "You won't be seeing me for a while. I think after tonight, it would be best if I were to limit my public outings for a while." He seemed satisfied, thoughtful. "We both got what we wanted in the end, didn't we, Raphael? Let's hope that our next meeting will be on good terms." He got into the taxi and a second later Raphael was watching the taillights of the vehicle shrink down the street.

He put the three vials in a small pouch on his belt. He walked to a nearby pay phone and spent a long moment wondering what he

would say if he got a hold of his brothers. Well, he'd improvise. He dropped the quarter into the slot and dialed. No answer. He was about to start for home but instead, dropped the returned quarter back in and dialed April's number.

The phone picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey April, it's me."

"Raph? Oh my god, where have you been? Where are you?"

"Err…listen April, have you seen any of the guys?" he asked, dodging her question. "I can't get 'em at home."

"They're out looking for you," she replied, her voice high-pitched with angry relief. "They asked Casey where you might have gone-"

"Aw, shit. What did he tell them?" Raph grumbled irately.

"They were upset, said you were up to something," April quickly remarked in Casey's defense. "I think they were going to some boathouse…"

The boathouse. He'd told Casey about it long ago. Didn't think he'd remember. Obscure enough, far away enough, that, having exhausted other ideas, they might have gotten it into their heads to look for him there. Which meant-

"Oh, fuck me," he moaned under his breath.

"Raph? What is it?" April said, in response to his sudden silence.

"Nothing. I gotta go. I'll talk to you later, 'kay?" He hung up and raced out of the phone booth.

There was a sound, like a distant and muffled clap of thunder, spreading up the hill from its base. Someone screamed, and Raph turned, scanning frantically, afraid that somehow he'd been exposed, that they were screaming at him. But no one was paying him the

least attention; people were gathering along the metal railing at the edge of the hill, staring and pointing across the river. His well-ingrained aversion to crowds thrown aside for the moment, Raphael jostled his way to the front. The main building of the Foot compound, half of it gone, was a smoky blaze, like a fire set on damp wood.

Raphael backed away slowly, dragging his eyes away from the sight of the weaving flames reflected in the black rippled surface of the river. Then he turned and began to run.

He pushed himself to a grueling speed and made it in record time. His lungs felt like they were being scalded from the inside, and his own panting was intrusively loud in his ears as he emerged from the storm drain he'd been racing through to feel the cool humid air that skimmed in from the harbor brushing against his skin. Just down the block he spotted the bulky shape of Casey's empty van.

Not allowing himself to break pace, he took the shortest path down to the quay, a steep pedestrian walkway with very little cover. He dropped down the flight of wooden stairs, sinking to a crouch on the concrete trail that led past the boathouse. He peered into the darkness, but didn't see or sense anyone near the building as he urgently but cautiously loped towards it.

Without warning, the boathouse exploded in a spray of wood and water. He staggered back, one arm thrown up against the sudden flare of heat and light, even as he felt the tremors of the underground detonation through his feet and legs. A second of salty rain pricked his skin as water thrown from the pier fell to earth amidst the pungent, acidic smell of destruction. His heart in his throat, Raphael straightened up slowly and took one disbelieving step forward. The structure that had once been the boathouse was rubble. The ground around it was uprooted in chunks, as though a giant farmer had tilled the cement.

His mind began screaming in denial and panic. *Were they inside? All of them?* He sprinted towards the heap of collapsed lumber.

Coughing at the dirt swirling in the air, he picked his way rapidly past the strewn debris, coming to a standstill at the lip of the small canyon where the underground tunnel and storeroom had completely caved in.

How could anyone have survived? Staring aghast at the ruins, surrounded suddenly by a horrific silence, he hadn't the faintest clue what he should, or could, do. He fell to his knees, strangling on the magnitude of his helplessness, the beginnings of a wrenching howl gathering within him.

"Well, well. Look who's here."

He leapt up, spinning around to face the source of the coolly sinister, if slightly surprised, voice. It was Korin. She was standing a few yards behind him. In her right hand, she held what looked like a short steel handle. There was no mistaking her malice.

Raphael couldn't speak. He was gripped by a frenzy of his own wretchedness. In the way that madness sometimes spawns clarity, he understood only that he was alone and that his life had been destroyed. For this woman, his enemy, to be here – it was his last and only blessing. With a roar, he launched himself at her.

She came to meet him. At the touch of a spring-loaded button, the object in her hand ejected into a twenty-inch metal baton that she brought across swiftly and adeptly to clash against the silver lines of his sais as they sought her throat. They raged across the strange arena of wreckage and uneven ground. He pushed her back with the sheer ferocity of his assault, but couldn't break through her quick parrying. She held him at bay, staying on the defensive as he wore himself down, her eyes alight with a fierce and righteous malevolence. He was the faster and more skillful fighter. But not today.

A split-second too slow, he failed to avoid the baton as it whistled past his ear and struck his collarbone. He grunted, his body shuddered at the blow, but he pushed past it, whip-kicking high,

intending to catch her in the chin, but instead hitting her in the chest. The air rushed from her lungs and her mouth fell open, sucking fiercely for air. He lunged, tasting the instant of anticipation before the fatal blow, then all at once, reeled from the surge of dizziness that hit him. His legs went rubbery as a queer numbness expanded from his center to the tips of his fingers.

No! Just a few more minutes! he entreated angrily, desperately. But it was no use; his weakened, poisoned body, pushed for days into long travel and strenuous battle, had crested its limit.

In the moment that he faltered, the end of the baton drove into his midriff with all the searing agony of a sharpened spear. He caught only a glimpse of Korin's pitiless expression, contorted in effort, before the weapon, continuing in a tight, expert arc, smacked across the right side of his face, nearly breaking his jaw. He went sprawling, tasted blood where his teeth had snapped down on his tongue. He saw his opponent's stance and position, thought of a thousand and one ways he could defend or counterattack to save himself, but couldn't execute a single one. He managed only, through sheer instinct, to fall and roll away from the incoming blow aimed at the base of his skull. It grazed his temple instead and sparks erupted in his field of vision. On all fours, he felt himself losing consciousness, even as his enemy sprang lightly after him, her weapon curving through air.

He felt no surprise at the impossible image of a speed-blurred figure barreling into Korin, deflecting her attack with an angry shout. Delirium. The feel of supporting hands under his arms as he fell into the abyss.

It was a long, painful crawl to wakefulness. He recalled vague, half-conscious sensations of being carried through the tunnels, and lying in bed at home, but he couldn't tell if these were real or merely figments of the dream world. He felt his own breath, and his motionless body encased in warmth. His eyelids were unreasonably heavy as he strained to lift them.

Donatello was looking down at him intently. "Hi Raph," he said, with typical aplomb. Only those who knew him well would have seen the considerable relief in his face. "You've been asleep for three days." Then he smiled and held his hand up as though swearing an oath. "Honest."

Raphael tried to say something, but failed to extract a single coherent sentence from his general state of confusion. He blinked at his brother stupidly. "Boathouse," he finally managed to croak.

"We were there," Don said, inferring the question. "But the Foot beat us to it. Doshida must have intentionally found a way to tip them off. By the time we arrived, there were probably four or five Foot inside. We hung back to see what happened, and then the place blew. We didn't realize you were there until we saw you fighting that lady ninja."

Raph raised his eye ridges questioningly.

Don shook his head somberly. "She's dead."

Raphael's eyes fell upon the cotton swab bandaged over the vein on the inside of his left elbow. There were three glass vials sitting on the bedside table, one of them empty.

"We found them in your belt," Don explained.

"So Doshida kept his word after all." Leonardo stood in the doorway, his arms crossed.

Raphael exhaled slowly. "Nothing to do with honor." His voice was dry and rough in his windpipe. It didn't sound much like his own. "Just to keep us out of the way."

There was a long minute of expectant silence. Then Leo said, "Raph, what haven't you told us about Doshida?"

He knew what the question meant. He couldn't determine whether Leo's serious tone was an expression of brotherly concern, or a controlled reaction to the desire to tear a strip out of him. Possibly both. Unsteadily, he pushed himself up on his elbows. Though he remained unsmiling, Leo crossed the room to help Don sit him up gently.

Raph swallowed, trying to moisten his throat, and said, "The Rising Hand was my idea."

He saw their dumbfounded expressions as his words hung in the air. "A few years ago, I saved Doshida from the Foot. I didn't know who he was. When I realized he was on the Foot hit list… well, enemy of your enemy being your friend and all that. I told him to get lost. Figured he'd go stick a knife in his belly anyway. Well, he didn't." He paused to take the glass of water that Mike, who'd just entered, was offering to him. "He asked me to help him find a place to hide out until he could skip the country. The Foot had done a number on him, so I thought, alright, fine, I'll take him to the boathouse.

"When I asked him why he'd turned traitor, he started talking about how there had to be more he could do with ninjitsu in this day and age than kow-tow to the Shredder and pretend to still be in the sixteenth century. He said that there were enough people that felt the same way, whether they knew it or not, that if they all acted on it, the Foot Clan might be toast in ten years."

In memory, Raphael's eyes formed the same scheming squint he had turned on Doshida three years ago. He took a drink from the glass he held. "What he said…well, it got to me. Maybe that's what he intended all along. I made a deal with him. He owed me big time, and he wasn't about to erase it the old-fashioned way, with a sword. I told him to stay in town, to take his crazy ideas a step further. Start a new type of clan, his clan, one that would mean the end of the Foot."

Raphael looked up at his brothers. He fought the urge to fidget under the scrutiny of what felt like a stone-faced jury. "Is that it?" Leo asked quietly.

Raph shook his head. "I helped him out a lot in the beginning. He wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise. I let him use the boathouse. I brought him money and supplies to live on until the Foot stopped searching for him so much. I kept busting up Foot deals, but I stayed clear of his when he started his business with the poisons and such. When he was back on his feet, I kinda lost track of him. With the Shredder gone, there didn't seem to be much of a point anymore."

"Until now," Mike finished. "Until he succeeded."

The atmosphere in the room was subdued. It was Don who broke the silence. "Why didn't you tell us?" he asked softly.

Raphael opened his mouth then closed it again. How could he explain? "I didn't really think it'd lead to anything," he said finally. "It was a waste of time, and more likely a way to get tangled up with the Foot worse than ever. Maybe even a Foot trap all along." He frowned, a glimmer of defensiveness in his eyes. "It was long shot, okay? But if there was a way to make sure the Foot bit the dust in the end, no matter what happened…yeah, it was a stupid gamble, but I took it." His voice fell. "Just didn't want anyone else to take it, that's all."

Raph waited for something to happen, waited for Leo to berate him, or for Mike to turn a look of hurt upon him. He couldn't blame them if they did.

They didn't. Perhaps they understood, in a way they might not have six weeks ago, the conviction that had made him willing to take outrageous risks on slim chances. And the fear that had driven him to keep it secret. It was the only explanation for the way that Leonardo now looked at his brother gravely and said, "So we're even."

It was a couple weeks later, after the whole convoluted story had been repeated to Splinter, April, and Casey, and after it seemed

apparent that both he (having taken the last dose of antidote) and Don were recovering without any disability, that Raphael sought out his sensai one afternoon after training.

His brothers were elsewhere. He was standing in the master's room, and the elderly rat's gaze was fixed patiently but expectantly on him alone. It was a situation he had rarely enjoyed in the past because he had rarely been in it willingly. He asked, simply, but with a hint of defensive vitriol that he had not intended, "Are you mad at me?"

Splinter's large brown eyes did not waver. "Should I be, Raphael?"

It was Raphael that wavered at the question. "I conspired with a former Foot member. I took big, stupid risks and didn't tell you about them. I was the one that started this Rising Hand mess that ended up hurting everyone. So," he couldn't keep the harsh sarcasm out of his rising voice, "aren't you *disappointed* with me? Aren't you going to tell me that I've done wrong?"

Splinter was silent, and for a minute, Raph felt sorry for the way he'd spoken. But it was this very same pensive silence of Splinter's that had been plaguing Raphael, filling him with more angry shame than an actual reprimand would have done.

"Many years ago," Splinter said softly, "I had a ludicrous idea. I thought I might start a clan of my own, and raise four infant turtles to be ninjas of great skill and integrity. I thought I might avenge my master, preserve the legacy I had inherited from him, and just perhaps, affect the history of ninjitsu." Splinter looked his pupil in the eye with a seriousness that did not diminish the underlying compassion. "I knew it would take years. Over the years, the consequences of my decision began to unfold, and not all of them were what I expected, or what I desired. That day you spoke to me in the training room, almost a month ago Raphael, do you remember it?" When Raph nodded, Splinter said, "I was grieving over the pain I had bestowed upon you and your brothers because of the decision I'd made so long ago."

"But that doesn't have anything to do with what I've done," Raph replied, stirred by the memory of what his master had said to him that day when, unbeknownst to him, his family had been mentally preparing themselves for his death.

"You are your father's son," Splinter told him. "Otherwise, you would not have done what you did. That is how I know I have succeeded."

Splinter's whiskers twitched as he lowered his head in an acknowledging nod that Raphael understood for being the signal that the sensai was done speaking. There didn't seem to be anything he could say in response. He wasn't even sure what he'd been expecting to get out of the conversation in the first place. As he stood before his master, torn between awkwardness and affection, he heard Leonardo come up behind him.

Raphael half-turned, looking at his brother over his shoulder. How long had Leo been standing just outside, listening, before his convenient entrance? Leo stepped up beside Raph and gave the short, informal bow to Splinter that they used outside of the training room. He spoke to the sensai, though one eye remained on Raphael.

"Master, as you know, we've been out scouting this week," he said. At least, three of the turtles had. Raphael had been out only a couple times; not yet strong enough to keep up with his siblings, he'd been firmly ordered to spend the majority of his time recuperating.

"What have you and your brothers discovered, Leonardo?" Splinter asked, as if there'd been no gap in the discussion with Raphael and what he was hearing now.

"What's left of the Foot compound has been abandoned. The survivors have relocated to a new base." He paused. "Karai's gone. The Foot have a new leader, most likely imported from Japan."

Splinter nodded gravely. "And Doshida?"

"His actual whereabouts are unknown. But all the minor ninja factions have been consolidated under the Rising Hand. Their numbers seem to be about equal to those of the Foot."

The master leaned back thoughtfully, clasping his long hands in his lap. He said with a trace of dark humor, "So the Rising Hand has risen."

Raphael recalled Saito's last words to him and felt their significance suddenly weighing heavily upon him. This was what it always came down to in the end; today, they were alive and together, and grateful for it, yet always the uncertainty of a dangerous future lapped at their heels.

"Yes," Splinter said ominously, as though reading his mind. "Times are changing."